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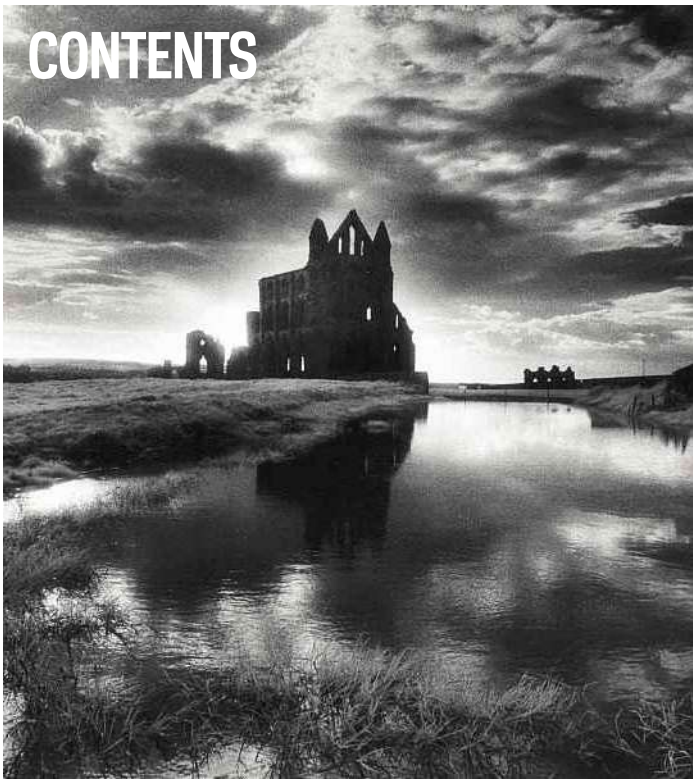

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IAN SHOWELL / KEYSTONE / GETTY IMAGES

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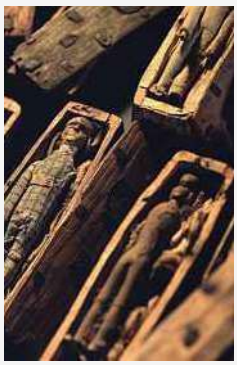
EDITORIAL

CAPUCINE DESLOUIS

OBSCURE OBJECTS

This issue contains more than a few tales concerning mysterious and baffling objects. The recent discovery of two strange coins during renovations at Bath Abbey revealed the bizarre story of a 40-year hoax perpetrated by an eccentric (or perhaps just bored) Swedish office clerk. It involved nearly 400 such "Devil Coins" and a bogus Satanic cult with its own cross-dressing priestess: see p12 for the full story.

Elsewhere, Ulrich Magin digs the dirt on another odd artefact, one recorded and described by Charles Fort himself as "a carved, geometric thing that, if found in a very old deposit, antedates human life". A classic out-of-place artefact, or OOPART, the Salzburg Cube has stirred controversy and argument ever since its discovery in 1885: was it an incredibly old fossilised meteorite, a geometric form that bore the marks of impossibly ancient tools, perhaps the result of contact with ancient astronauts, or just a piece of slag? Turn to p54 for a definitive account of this Austrian oddity (which, by the way, is neither a cube nor to be found in Salzburg…)



Ted Harrison investigates another mineral mystery: why, with perfectly good material available from local sources, did churches across mediæval Wales and Ireland go to such great lengths to obtain stone from a long-vanished quarry in the obscure Somerset village of Dundry? Could the village, a mere stone's throw (ahem) from Glastonbury, have been the centre of a thriving mystical 'brand' in the Middle Ages?

And our cover story, by Mike Dash (p34), examines the curious history and ongoing mystery of the 17 "Lilliputian coffins", each containing a miniature carved and clothed figure, found by boys out rabbiting on Arthur's Seat in Edinburgh in 1836. Was this strange burial some sort of magical spell, or a memorial to some long-forgotten local disaster? Could it have been a cryptic commemoration of the victims of the Edinburgh 'resurrection men', Burke and Hare? Who carved these strange figures, and why, remains an open question; but Edinburgh exile Jeff Nisbet has come up with an intriguing new theory (see p38).

The biggest surprise to us about the story of the Edinburgh coffins is that we've never before covered it in 43 years of publication – and this despite it's being a case (like the Salzburg Cube) that caught the attention of Fort himself. Back in 1995, though, at an exhibition curated by our own Ian Simmons, we did feature eight of the 'fairy coffins' in an exhibition called 'Of Monsters and Miracles' (see Ian's 'Wonders of the Vaults', **FT81:299-33**) at the Croydon Clocktower. If you want to see the curious coffins today, they are on display at their permanent home in the National Museum of Scotland, Edinburgh (www.nms.ac.uk/explore-our-collections/stories/scottish-history-and-archaeology/mystery-of-the-miniature-coffins/).

CREAM OF THE CROP

As we were going to press we received the sad news that Doug Bower had passed away at the ripe old age of 94. Doug, along with his prankster partner Dave Chorley, was responsible for hundreds of early crop circles from the late 1970s to the early 1990s, when the pair went public with their story. It wasn't one that over-invested 'croppies' and New Agers necessarily wanted to hear; instead of being the product of little-understood natural forces such as plasma vortices, messages from visiting aliens or spontaneous formations emanating from Gaia herself, crop circles were suddenly situated as an ongoing man-made phenomenon, somewhere between large-scale land art and cheeky hoaxing. Next issue, circle-maker Rob Irving will be bringing us a full tribute to Doug and his part in the creation of what was, as much as anything, a wholly new modern myth.

ERRATUM

FT368: A number of readers spotted that Russian hackers had interfered with the cover of our July issue, which despite going on sale in late June 2018 bore the cover date 'July 2017'. Our old stablemates *Viz* magazine reported similar tampering with a word balloon in their own issue 276 in the same month. The now infamous 'FT time-travel issue' is, of course, already a collector's item...

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A DIGEST OF THE WORLDWIDE WEIRD

STRANGE DAYS

MOTHER MARY WEEPS AGAIN

Crying BVM statues hailed as miracles in New Mexico and Guatemala

ABOVE: The weeping Madonna of Hobbs, New Mexico, photographed with tears rolling down her cheeks.

A hollow bronze statue of the Blessed Virgin Mary at Our Lady of Guadalupe Catholic Church in Hobbs, New Mexico, has been 'weeping' oil according to church leaders (a previous report – see **FT369:22** – suggested the statue was crying tears that smell of roses). An investigator with the Diocese of Las Cruces said the "tears" have the same chemical makeup as olive oil treated with perfume – a substance that, when blessed, would be chrism, a sacred oil used in the Catholic Church to anoint parishioners. According to one expert, the question is not merely how it's happening (or whether it's happening naturally) but how people are responding to the phenomenon and why they may want to believe in it. "The Catholic Church has a long history of believing in supernatural signs," said John Thavis, author of *The Vatican Prophecies* (2015). "There's a kind of curiosity and enthusiasm when something like this happens because it seems to confirm the traditional belief that God works in our own world and sometimes the supernatural is visible in our world."

The phenomenon started on Pentecost Sunday, 20 May, when parishioners noticed that there appeared to be tears streaming from the statue's eyes, said Judy Ronquillo, the church's business manager. She said the 7ft (2m) statue continued "weeping" the next day and several times subsequently. The Rev Jose Segura said that, in his 12 years as a priest, he had never seen anything like it and had struggled at first to believe it was real. He pointed out that there are cameras in the church, and no one had been caught interfering with the statue. Photos and a video released by the church show the statue with what appears to be liquid inside the eyes and down the cheeks, mouth and chin. In one photo, it looks as if the tear trail might have started on the upper eyelids.

Deacon Jim Winder, vice chancellor of the Catholic Diocese of Las Cruces, said he and others had examined the statue and the surrounding area, including the ceiling, and found no signs that it had been altered in any way. Investigators also spoke to the manufacturer in Mexico, dispelling any theories that the statue might be leaking or secreting some substance. They collected about five millilitres (or a teaspoon) of the "tears" and had them tested. Winder said the results showed it had "the same chemical fingerprint of olive oil treated with some kind of scent," like chrism, but added that it was clear – not the brownish colour associated with most olive oil.

Catholic Church officials didn't seem very concerned with why the statue appeared to be crying or where the tears might be coming from – God, Satan or man – but the diocese was monitoring the response from the community. "That, in all honesty, is what's most important," said Winder; "that it's prompted people maybe to be closer to God. That's what really matters." The Bible talks about judging a tree by its fruit, so "we want to judge this phenomenon by what's coming out of it."

John Thavis said that in these situations, the Vatican usually allows the phenomenon to play out without endorsing it, and that it expects the same from local bishops because the occurrences "often turn out to be hoaxes or are explained by science." But it can take years to find the answer, and then there are other times when, despite a thorough investigation, no explanation can be found at all. Rob Hardy, who submitted this news report, mused: "Why do the deities content themselves with these party tricks when there are real problems they could solve?" *Washington Post, 18 July 2018.*

• On 25 April, around 3.30pm, a statue of Our Lady of Fatima in Guatemala was observed shedding "abundant tears", according to José Antonio G Dominguez, Mexican correspondent for *Gaudium Press* (2 May 2018). The statue was in a "house of the Heralds of the Gospel" in the village of San José Pinula near Guatemala City. The same phenomenon allegedly manifested at another "house of the Heralds of the Gospel" in San José, the capital of Costa Rica, when a statue of "Our Lady of Good Counsel" began to weep on 26 April, her liturgical feast day. Señor Dominguez also tells us that: "In Spain, a small image of Our Lady of Fatima, bought by a girl participating in an excursion of the female branch of the Heralds of the Gospel to the Sanctuary of Our Lady in Fatima, Portugal, shed tears of blood on the return trip to Madrid." It's evidently been a lacrimose time for the BVM.

GHOSTLY WEDDINGS

"I married an 18th century Haitian pirate!"

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SWAMP GAS AND FAIRIES

In search of the elusive Will o'the Wisp

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VENERABLE BEASTS

The super-oldies of the animal kingdom

PAGE 28

THE CONSPIRASPHERE

With the mainstream media locked in an ever-stranger dance with the conspiracy theorists, getting to the truth about the US election may now be nigh-on impossible says NOEL ROONEY

THE RUSSIAGATE RABBIT HOLE

The rabbit hole that is the Russiagate scandal has achieved a peculiar position in the warren of political conspiracy. As it continues to oscillate in and out of front-page focus it threatens to become the central issue of the Trump presidency, nationally divisive along traditional partisan lines, and a potential impeachment threat to the Donald himself; perhaps more importantly, it has re-opened the US-Russian fault-line that many still consider constitutes the greatest threat of world war in our far from peaceful world.

I don't intend to explore the relative veracity of the claims and counter-claims; there are thousands of people already taking on that task. I am interested in an aspect of the affair that has had less media attention: the curious trajectory of the scandal in relation to the Conspirasphere. The meta-story of Russiagate is an instructive insight into the developing relationship between the mainstream media and conspiracy theory.

Intelligence chatter about Russian intentions to interfere in the presidential election of 2016, and communication between Russian sources and members of Trump's campaign staff, began to surface as early as 2015; this in itself is not news – the US and Russia (and any other powerful state with perceived interests abroad) have been interfering in other nations' elections, usually by influencing political campaigns from the inside, ever since they had the wherewithal to do so. The fact that it became news strongly suggests that some geo-political actors in the US saw an opportunity to damage the incipient Trump campaign and at the same time to reinstate Russia as the international villain *du jour*, after some years of the US filling that not exactly coveted position; so, a conspiracy of sorts.

The Conspirasphere took the story and did a number of things with it: first, they called it a conspiracy theory (and who would be better placed to recognise such a thing, in a pot/kettle kind of way?); but they also reinterpreted the whole affair, casting it as an attempt by the Clinton campaign to deflect attention away from the burgeoning cloud of conspiracy theories fogging its electoral efforts by inventing a conspiracy theory of its own with which to smear Trump. At the same time, a species of courtroom drama began over the reliability of evidence; and, intelligence chatter being what it is, that battle is still running. While much of this secondary imbroglio initially took place in the Conspirasphere, it all made its way into the mainstream; which, in a strange inversion of its usual role vis a vis conspiracy theories, responded in kind. Objective commentary has been at something of a premium, and instead we have regularly been treated to the spectacle of the mainstream advancing thinly supported suggestions of Russian skulduggery, and the Conspirasphere adopting the empirical position and hollering: "Where's the evidence?"

To date, the apogee of this darkly comic pantomime is an article in the *New York Times* magazine, which speculates that Trump may have been a protégé (or a honey-trapped dupe) of sinister Russian interests since as early as 1987. This is tantamount to suggesting that an incumbent president is a de facto Russian spy, a claim no less outrageous than suggesting that an incumbent president lied about his birth certificate and was ineligible for the position; if anything, considerably more outrageous.

So, first, a media industry desperate for clicks laughs at the tin-foil hat brigade to pull in a few more jaded readers; then, the odd conspiracy theory is given a hint of credence, by media outlets aware that many of their readers are beginning to do exactly the same thing; then, the establishment press begins to engage in a way of thinking, and writing, that when offered by the alternative media is called 'conspiracy theory'. This is a rabbit hole all of its own, and I suspect we will be footling down it for some time to come.

EXTRA! EXTRA!

FT'S FAVOURITE HEADLINES FROM AROUND THE WORLD

MP FIGHTS FOR BRAINS

(Melbourne) Herald-Sun, 5 Aug 2016.

Japan's pet cafes where customers can stroke owls

D.Telegraph, 9 Sept 2016.

LEPROSY 'BROUGHT TO UK BY VIKING SQUIRRELS'

D.Telegraph, 26 Oct 2017.

British businesses 'could fall victim to vultures'

Morning Star, 11 April 2017.

CHOCOLATE COMPANY ATTRACTS MAN FROM MARS

Adelaide Advertiser, 20 Sept 2017.

Robots may be given antidepressants to keep their spark

Times, 12 April 2018.

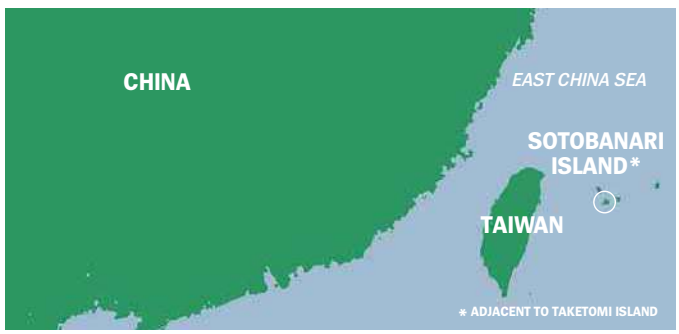
BANISHED FROM PARADISE

The naked hermit of Sotobanari has been cast out of Eden by the authorities

REUTERS / YUYA SHINO

ABOVE: Masafumi Nagasaki surveys his island hermitage: "Here, I'm not told what to do. I just follow nature's rules." **FACING PAGE:** Masafumi enjoys a simple bowl of rice.

Masafumi Nagasaki was living in a state of perfect bliss, wandering naked and alone on a tropical island, foraging for food and watching turtles hatch. Then a report of his ill-health prompted police to make him rejoin mainstream Japanese society last April. Nagasaki, 82, lived on the remote island of Sotobanari, about 120 miles (190km) east of Taiwan, for 29 years, having moved there to escape urban life. The wiry and tanned recluse was picked up on a nearby island in Okinawa Prefecture, south-west of Japan, after police were told he appeared to be "weak". Since then, he has been living in a local authority property 45 miles (70km) away on Ishigaki island, according to Alvaro Cerezo, a documentary maker who stayed with him for five days in 2014. Nagasaki "probably only had the flu", Cerezo said, but he is not being allowed to return to Sotobanari, an uninhabited island half a mile in diameter and his home since 1989.



The naked hermit was coy about his background, although he said he had been married and had two children. There were suggestions he had worked as a photographer, in a factory and in Osaka's seedy nightlife district before turning his back on civilisation. Initially, he intended to stay on the island for a couple of years, but discovered that he enjoyed his newfound lifestyle so much that he decided to live there permanently. "Here, I'm not told what to do," he said. "I just follow nature's rules." He spent his first few years on Sotobanari wearing the clothes he had brought with him from the mainland, but a typhoon swept away virtually all his possessions, including clothing. "Walking around naked doesn't really fit in with normal society, but on the island it feels right; it's like a uniform," he said in an interview with Reuters in 2012. "If you put on clothes, you'll feel completely out of place."

Nagasaki followed a strict routine, governed by a wristwatch he kept on a tree branch. He stayed in his tent between 6.30pm and 8.30am to avoid mosquitoes and did morning exercises on the beach. He spent much of his day clearing up flotsam and jetsam, and foraging for vegetarian food. He had given up meat and fish and would not touch turtle eggs after seeing hatchlings scurry out to sea. He used a series of cooking pots to gather rainwater. Once a week, he would dress and sail to a neighbouring island where he would buy rice cakes and drink; his sister regularly sent him money. Before being forced to leave, he told Cerezo that he had wanted to stay indefinitely. "All that I want I can find here. I don't need anything else. I've already told my family that I will die here. I want to be killed by a typhoon so nobody can try to save me." *Sun (online), 25 June; Guardian, 27 June; D.Telegraph, 28 June 2018.*

TWO-TONE PUSS

This British shorthair cat, pictured at her home in France, is a chimera – the result of non-identical twin embryos fusing in the womb. Her face is divided into halves of light grey and black by a straight line, while the rest of her body is black. Chimeras, which have two sets of DNA, occur in many species including humans, where signs can be subtle, such as having different-coloured eyes. *Times, D.Mail, 22 Feb 2017.*
PHOTO: JEAN-MICHEL LABAT/ARDEA/CATERS NEWS

SIDELINES...

CROPS AND ROBBERS

Thieves broke into a barn and took an entire crop circle exhibition worth £6,000, including digital cameras and photo displays. Founder Monique Klinkenbergh, 59, moved the collection from the Netherlands to Pewsey, Wiltshire, in 2013. It was due to attract thousands of croppies this summer. *Sun, 5 June 2018*.

SHARK APPEAL

Bill Heine, 73, suffering from terminal cancer, has applied to Oxford City Council to have the 25ft (7.6m) glass fibre shark sticking out of his roof in the suburb of Headington listed as a local heritage asset. It has attracted thousands of tourists every year since it was added to the house in 1986 and is "loved by locals", according to Mr Heine. See cover of **FT73** (Feb 1994) *D.Telegraph, 24 May 2018*.

DAY FLIPPER

A large grey seal was spotted in a field near Thirsk, North Yorkshire, some 50 miles (80km) inland. The adventurous male is thought to have entered the Humber Estuary and swum up the river Swale in search of fish. *D. Mail, 11 April 2018.*

IN DENIAL

Egyptian singer and TV personality Sherine Abdel-Wahab was jailed for six months after warning a fan at one of her concerts against drinking Nile water. The celebrity, a former judge on the Arab world's version of TV talent show *The Voice*, was convicted of insulting the state by suggesting the river was polluted. *E. Standard, 28 Feb 2018.*

MARTIN ROSS

SHIVER ME TIMBERS! | Woman marries ghost of an 18th-century Haitian pirate

AMANDA TEAGUE

ABOVE: The bride and groom, represented by a skull-and-crossbones flag. **BELOW**: Teague has shared her story on television.

A woman tired of "physical world" men found love in the ghost of an 18th century Haitian pirate and married him on a small boat in the Atlantic on 23 July 2016. The weather was stormy and waves rocked the vessel violently. Amanda Teague, 45, divorced mother of four, said "I do" in a white lace gown and veil. The groom was represented by a black pirate flag depicting skull-and-crossbones, and a wedding ring was placed on a candle.

Teague claims the spiritual relationship began in 2014 when she was lying in bed at home in Drogheda, Ireland, and sensed his presence. After six months of continued contact with the ghost of the deceased freebooter, the couple made plans to tie the knot. Teague describes their chemistry as "incredible" and says that Jack is "the best sex she's ever had". The couple held another wedding in October 2017, which involved a more comprehensive group of family and friends to better celebrate their union. "We sailed into international waters so we could legally marry," she said. "It's not legal in the UK or Ireland to marry a deceased person." She claims to be the first person in the UK and Ireland to legally marry a ghost. Though the law does not expressly recognise marriage to a deceased person, Teague followed legal advice to bypass the rules. A registrar was present at the wedding, Jack Teague gave consent through a medium that was independent of her and Amanda even changed her last name to his. (No news reports seen by FT provide her previous surname).

Ghost relationships and marriages are not uncommon. Last December, *Cornwall Live* reported the stories of two women who were deep in the throes of paranormal passion. Amethyst Realm, a 27-year-old spiritual guidance counsellor from Bristol, described her sexual ectoplasmic encounters with 20 different ghosts. Realm's story is just one of countless others that have been shared by believers around the world.

Posthumous marriage, otherwise known as necrogamy,

is the term given to marriages in which one participating partner is dead. In some societies, it is possible and even an established practice. In France, it is explicitly legal to marry a deceased person. Article 171 of the French civil code states: "The President of the Republic may, for serious reasons, authorise the celebration of the marriage where one of the future spouses is dead." During World War I, the French government allowed hundreds of women to marry their partners who died in the war. Decades later, France opened up posthumous marriages for civilians as well. When a broken dam killed 400 people in Frejus, President de Gaulle allowed Iréne Jodart, who lost her fiancé André Capra in the 1959 incident, to marry his ghost. Posthumous marriages continue to be granted in France. Magali Jaskiewicz married her deceased fiancé in 2009 after he died in a car accident two days after proposing to her.

Similar forms of wedlock are legal in China, Sudan, South Korea, Germany, South Africa, Japan and even the US. Isaac Woginiak, a resident of Miami, died of a heart attack in 1987, before his impending marriage. Two weeks later, Circuit Judge George Orr ordered the court clerk to sign a marriage license on behalf of Woginiak so that his fiancé could follow through with their wedding. In China, a *minghun* (spirit) marriage is a well-established tradition, albeit rarely practised today. Across mainland China, a woman can marry her fiancé's spirit before adopting a child to carry on his family lineage. According to *Grave Vows: A Cross-Cultural Examination of the Varying Forms of Ghost Marriage Among Five Societies* by Lucas J Schwartze, a rooster must be present at the ceremony to represent the groom, the woman must take a vow of celibacy and immediately move in with her husband's family following the wedding. The practice was banned by the Communist Party in 1949, but the ritual still endures, especially in remote regions of the country.

In all these examples, however, the deceased has been a person who was known to the bride prior to his death. Teague claims to have met Jack as a ghost. She never knew him while he was alive – if he *was* ever alive. Teague says she doesn't even know what Jack looks or sounds like. The couple communicate with each other through mediumship, and the only thing Teague knows about her husband's physical appearance is that he is of African descent and presents himself as a man in his early 50s – the age he died. "He has very dark jet-black hair, so he tells me."

Teague appeared on *Loose Women* on Valentines Day 2018 and revealed she buys her spectral spouse a glass of rum when they go on dates to her local pub. "It is well known that people often feel a spirit touch their hands, their face or their hair," she said. "You can literally feel the physical act of what the spirit is doing to you, and the spirit can feel it too." In a video posted to social media, she offers advice on how to achieve satisfying sex with a ghost. "Spiritual sex is all about being able to feel the energy," she said. "It's nothing to do with masturbation."

According to Teague, her husband was hanged in 1753, after he was caught assisting the escape of slaves. She insists her husband's physical existence was the inspiration for the fictional character Jack Sparrow in the *Pirates of the Caribbean* films, played by Johnny Depp. Sparrow's father, played by Keith Richards, is the former pirate lord of Madagascar and a captain who goes by the name of Edward Teague. Around the time the couple met in 2015, Amanda Teague was working part-time as Northern Ireland's only female Jack Sparrow impersonator, and although the coincidence may seem far-fetched, she insists the "real Jack" reached out to her in the afterlife because of her obsession with the movie franchise. Entertainment reports contradict her claims. According to *New Musical Express*, for instance, Jack Sparrow was created by screenwriters Ted Elliott and Terry Rossio and inspired by the real Keith Richards and *Looney Tunes* character Pepé Le Pew. *irishcentral.com, 15 Jan; Sun, 15 Jan, 21 Feb; Newsweek, 22 Jan*

ABOVE: Amethyst Realm claims to have slept with 20 different ghosts. **LEFT:** Amanda Teague in Jack Sparrow mode.

"You can literally feel the physical act of what the spirit is doing to you..."

SIDELINES...

ESTONED AGAIN

The tiny Estonian town of Kanepi (meaning 'cannabis') has voted by online poll of all Estonians to adopt a marijuana leaf with the caption 'Mari Jane', as the emblem for its flag and coat of arms. The name comes from a traditional cottage industry that sprang up around the processing of hemp into oil and fabric centuries ago. The logo was approved by Estonia's heraldry commission. *D.Telegraph, 18 May 2018.*

HEART ATTACK

Computer security experts are warning that cyber attackers could target patients' pacemakers or heart pumps. Any such device connected to the Internet could present hackers with a back door into an entire system. Following ransomware attacks on the NHS and other health service networks worldwide, specialists are advising that passwords and other security measures be implemented. *D.Telegraph, 15 Mar 2018.*

RAMPANT FAKERY

The Terrus museum in Elne, southern France, dedicated to the artist Etienne Terrus (1857-1922), has discovered that 82 of the 140 works on display are worthless forgeries. At least 20 per cent of paintings owned by major museums worldwide may not be by the purported artists. And gems in the National Museum in Prague, once thought to be worth millions, have turned out to be glass fakes. *D.Mail, 9 Mar; telegraph.co.uk, 28 April; NY Times, 3 May 2018.*

POET REVEALED

The remains of Samuel Taylor Coleridge have been found in a former wine cellar below St Michael's Church, Highgate, north London. The exact whereabouts of the poet's body (and also those of his wife, daughter, son-in-law and grandson) had remained unknown until a recent exploration revealed five coffins walled up in a cellar once belonging to Ashurst House, a 17th-century mansion. *Camden New Journal, 17 May 2018.*

GRIM RELIC

A recently discovered 260ft (60m) stretch of the Berlin Wall has been awarded protected status by the city's authorities. *D.Telegraph, 6 Feb 2018.*

SIDELINES...

SPORTING THRILL

The North University of China in Taiyuan, northern Shanxi province, livened up its sports day last May with hand grenade tossing. Students threw weighted replicas of a Type 23 projectile, a wood-handled grenade based on the German WWII Stielhandgranate, or stick grenade. We are reminded of a 1918 publication, *Hand-Grenade Throwing as a College Sport*, by Lewis Omer (Spalding, NY & Chicago). *BBC News, 24 April 2018.*

EMPEROR'S CLOTHES

'Sorcery', an artwork by Mark James, consists of 487 hovering invisible orbs, in clusters of four at 12 locations, each 2.4m (7ft 10in) in diameter, and composed of "pure space". The ones at Tate Modern, called "Bubbles of Joy", are floating in pairs in the large rooms on the first floor. Of course, you can't actually *see* them... *Oxford Times, 20 Feb 2018.*

STING IN THE TAIL

RSPCA officers were called to investigate a "deadly looking" scorpion on the loose in Grantham, Lincolnshire. A concerned citizen had erected a makeshift cordon around the beast, but officials found it was a children's rubber toy. *Sun, 29 Mar 2018.*

WINGED WARNING

Charles Darwin suggested that birds use their wings to communicate as well as to fly. 150 years later, scientists have now proved him correct. In a study of crested pigeons, it was found that a particular wing feather – which creates a high-pitched warning sound in flight – is only deployed when danger is sensed. *D.Telegraph, 10 Nov 2018.*

MARTIN ROSS

WHALE I NEVER!

Video reveals how a helpful humpback came to the rescue of unsuspecting diver

NAN HAUSER / CATERS

ABOVE: Marine biologist Nan Hauser claims that this "altruistic" 23-ton humpback whale shielded her from an unseen tiger shark.

A marine biologist says a humpback whale shielded her from a 15ft (4.6m) tiger shark in the South Pacific last October. Nan Hauser, 63, President of the Center for Cetacean Research and Conservation, said she didn't understand the actions of the 23-ton whale that she met face to face off the Cook Islands. Then she saw the shark. She's heard on video telling the massive mammal: "I love you!"

She said that whales are "altruistic" and often hide seals from predators, but she had never experienced or read about a whale protecting a human. "If someone told me the story, I wouldn't believe it," she said. She was oblivious of the shark during the tense 10-minute encounter. The whale started to nudge her, and appeared to push her with its head. It also appeared to shield her with its pectoral fin. Her research companions turned off an underwater video drone, fearing that she was going to be mauled to death, but Hauser kept her video rolling. She uploaded it on 8 January 2018 and it spread quickly on social media. She suffered some bruises and scratches from the encounter, but was otherwise unscathed. After she swam back to her boat, the whale surfaced nearby as if to check

NAN HAUSER

"If someone told me the story, I wouldn't believe it," she said

on her. That was when she saw the shark. She later learned that, while one humpback was focused on her, another was swatting the water near the tiger shark, seemingly keeping it at bay.

"I've spent 28 years underwater with whales, and have never had a whale so tactile and so insistent on putting me on his head, or belly, or back, or, most of all, trying to tuck me under his huge pectoral fin," said Hauser. "If he rammed me too hard, or hit me with his flippers or tail, that would break my bones and rupture my organs. If he held me under his pectoral fin, I would have drowned... I was sure that it was most likely going to be a deadly encounter."

While Hauser credits the whale for protecting her, she acknowledges she can't know what the whale was thinking. James Sulikowski, a marine biologist and professor at the University of New England who has studied tiger sharks, said he is not convinced that the whale saved her life. "The shark could have just been hanging around," he said. "There's really no way of knowing the whale's motivation." *[AP] livescience.com, D.Mirror, 9 Jan 2018.*

• Here's a classic item from the FT vaults. Art student Xavier Muntada, 21, was all in after clinging to his surfboard for 12 hours in mountainous seas off the Costa Brava. As he dozed off and started to let go of the board, he felt a gentle nudge and saw a dolphin swimming alongside. From then on, each times Xavier dropped off, the dolphin nudged him awake. When a boat finally appeared on the horizon, the dolphin attracted the fishermen's attention, then swam off. "I don't think I would have survived without my friend the dolphin", said Xavier. *Sunday Express, 11 Aug 1985.*

DEAD AS A DODO | Was the celebrated Oxford bird that inspired *Alice* the victim of foul play?

ABOVE: The preserved head of the Oxford dodo. **BELOW:** It was the inspiration for the bird in Lewis Carrol's *Alice in Wonderland*.

Researchers at the University of Warwick have used a form of CT scanning technology and 3D analysis software to probe the anatomy and habits of the famous dodo now held at the Oxford University Museum of Natural History – the world's best-preserved specimen, which inspired the character in *Alice in Wonderland*. They discovered it was shot in the back of the head and neck with lead pellets. "The shot is consistent with it being very fine calibre fowling shot – the sort of shot that was used to down birds," said Prof Paul Smith, the museum director. The revelation has astonished experts, who thought the bird had lived out its life in London as a money-spinning curiosity.

Dodos, native to the island of Mauritius in the Indian Ocean, were first seen by Westerners in 1598 and went extinct 70 years later, following the arrival of sailors. While it was initially thought the birds were eaten into oblivion, it now seems likely their demise was down to habitat destruction, predation and competition for resources by the rats, monkeys, goats and other animals that arrived with the sailors. The Oxford dodo came to the city in 1683 as part of the collection of Elias Ashmole who had obtained it from John Tradescant, the celebrated garden designer. It was moved from the Ashmolean to the Museum of Natural History in 1860. The bird crops up in Tradescant's catalogue for his museum in Vauxhall in 1656.

HULTON ARCHIVE / GETTY IMAGES

Where he got it isn't clear, but the writer Sir Hamon L'Estrange had recorded in 1638 that there was a building in London where you could pay to see a dodo, and since very few dodos made it alive from Mauritius to Europe – maybe only the one – it is assumed that this was the bird now in Oxford.

"If it was the bird that was in London in 1638, why would anyone just shoot a dodo in London?' asks Prof Smith. "And if it was [shot] in Mauritius, which is I suppose marginally more likely, there is a really serious question about how it was preserved and transported back, because they didn't have many of the techniques that we use in the modern day to preserve soft tissues – and we know it came back with its feathers and its skin intact." Chemical analysis of the lead shot might shed light on where it came from, and thus where the avian execution took place. *theguardian.com, BBC News, 20 April; D.Telegraph, 21 April 2018.*

SIDELINES...

BUSY LITIGANT

Mandy Richards was selected to fight the marginal seat of Worcester for the Labour Party. It then turned out she had challenged the evidence for the murder of Jo Cox and the terror attacks at Westminster and Manchester. She is also banned from bringing court actions without permission after claims against MI5, MI6, the Met Police, electricity and broadband suppliers, Royal Mail, Hackney Council, her GP and her flat's freeholder. She is likely to be deselected. *D.Telegraph, 24 April 2018*.

RULE BY THE GUN

A Blackpool couple were convicted of child cruelty after shooting their children with a BB gun for minor household offences. The five children, aged between seven and 15, were punished for trivial misdemeanours such as not changing a nappy, not washing the dishes, and having a boyfriend. At Preston Crown Court, the father was sentenced to two years imprisonment and the mother given a suspended sentence. *BBC News, 5 Sept 2017*.

VOODOO MANAGEMENT

A report in management journal *The Leadership Quarterly* suggests that employees' morale and productivity may be improved if they stick pins into dolls resembling the boss. Following an unhappy workplace interaction with a supervisor, staff who used 'voodoo dolls' as a means of symbolic retaliation were found to have reduced feelings of injustice and were more productive compared to a control group. *D.Telegraph, 8 Mar 2018.*

MARTIN ROSS

SIDELINES...

RIGHT GUARD

A study at Stockholm University has suggested there is a correlation between holding strong right-wing views and having a fear of infectious disease or concerns about hygiene. Those people easily disgusted by bad breath or body odour are drawn to authoritarian leaders like Trump, who seek the suppression of protest movements and wish to ensure that different groups "stay in their places," said researcher Jonas Olofsson. *D.Telegraph, 28 Feb 2018.*

COYPU STEW

Coypus, giant rodents introduced to Italy from South America a century ago to be farmed for their fur, are running rampant in northern regions, particularly the Po valley, devouring crops and destroying embankments. To help reduce numbers, Michele Marchi, a local mayor, has suggested eating them in restaurants and at village food festivals. "It's almost better than rabbit," he said. *D.Telegraph, 4 May 2018*.

WOULD EWE BELIEVE IT

A Co. Offaly farmer was astounded to discover that one of his ewes had given birth to six lambs (rather than the usual two), at odds said to be a million to one. In Co. Westmeath, another farmer's ewe had quintuplets. Elsewhere in Ireland, in Co. Mayo, a 17-year-old ewe named Betty Boo gave birth for the 16th time in a row. *agriland.ie, 14 Mar 2018.*

UNLUCKY STRIKE

A Queensland farmer found six of his cows (worth about £5,700), lying in a row dead beside a metal fence. Two days before, a thunderstorm had hit the area. It is thought the cows had all been struck by lightning and instantaneously died of heart attacks. *(Sydney) D.Telegraph, 9 Mar 2018.*

BROTHERLY LOVE

Two lifelong friends learned they are long-lost brothers. Walter Macfarlane never knew his father, and Alan Robinson, his friend of 60 years, knew only that he had been adopted – until last year, when their true relationship was revealed. They were born in Hawaii, 15 months apart. *<i>, 28 Dec 2017.*

DEVIL COINS

A puzzling numismatic discovery in Bath Abbey reveals a 40-year-long hoax by a Danish eccentric

The 19th-century corporation stalls inside Bath Abbey were recently removed in advance of vital repair and stabilisation work to the Abbey's collapsing floor. Apart from an intact order of service for 15 May 1902, two bizarre coins were discovered. The coins depict a devil and bear the legend CIVITAS DIABOLI on one side and, on the reverse, 13 MAJ ANHOLT 1973.

Research revealed the story of a Danish eccentric who perpetrated a 40-year-long hoax, only unmasked nine years after his death. The date on the coins refers to an incident that took place on 13 May 1973 on the island of Anholt, situated between Denmark and Sweden. Thirteen 'ritual sites' were discovered by local residents, which precipitated an investigation by police from the Danish mainland. The sites were identified by the presence of strange masks, weird stone formations, bones wrapped in string, black candles and a (fake) shrunken head on a stake. The story was picked up by the Danish national media, prompting salacious stories of black masses and Satanic cults. One newspaper's claim of possible human sacrifice was soon debunked when the alleged victim contacted the police to say she was alive and living on the mainland.

After a few months the media hysteria petered out, but the Anholt mystery trundled on. Coins like those found at Bath Abbey began to be discovered 'hidden' in churches and museums across Denmark. Some were accompanied by letters claiming to be from a Satanic high priestess named Alice Mandragora (a name which appears on some coin designs alongside the wonderfully named Karl Klunck and Dunk Wokgnal). Other letters from Mandragora or short stories about the 'Anholt cult' have been found hidden in Køge city museum and even behind paintings at the police headquarters in Copenhagen. All these artefacts reference the date 13 May 1973 and Anholt. To date nearly 400 coins are known to have been found. The Bath coins are the first to have turned up outside Scandinavia.

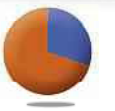
In 2013 the Danish newspaper *Politiken* ran a six-part investigation into the Anholt mystery, revealing it was a hoax perpetrated by Knud Langkow, an office clerk at the National Gallery of Denmark who had died in 2004 aged 73. His niece, Lene Langkow Saaek, told the newspaper that he was not a Satanist and that the hoax was just his sense of humour. "I think normality annoyed him", she said. "He did not like ordinary. He did it to make fun of the bourgeoisie and to get people out of their chairs and to wonder." It seems that his sense of humour struck a chord with a select group within the Danish numismatist community who were in on the joke. Independently of Langkow, respected Danish coin expert Jørgen Sømod, along with the original coin engraver Bent Jensen, are both alleged to have designed, minted and hidden hundreds of their own 'Anholt Coins'.

The Anholt coins from Bath are currently being conserved by Wessex Archæology and will be included in the final site archive alongside artefacts dating from the Roman through to the modern period. *www.wessexarch.co.uk, 21 June; Guardian, Metro, 27 June 2018.*

KØGE MUSEUM

TOP: Two sides of the coin – one of the Bath Abbey discoveries. **ABOVE:** In 2013, Knud Langkow (aka Alice Mandragora) was revealed as the creator of the Anholt Coins.

Maria's store helps her support her five children



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Khoeurm's farm will provide jobs for her local community

Raised: **£640.00**
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Swamp gas and corpse candles

DAVID HAMBLING pursues the elusive *ignis fatuus*, but finds that sightings are now vanishingly rare

The Will o'the Wisp is a light phenomenon appearing in many countries under different names: *ignis fatuus* ("foolish fire"), Hob's Lantern, ghost lights, elf-fire, corpse candle, Jack o'Lantern, fairy lights and many more (see **FT360:46-51)**. Such lights have been recorded for centuries, but are still an enigma to scientists, one which may now not ever be resolved.

Folklore says the lights are mischievous supernatural beings. As Milton puts it in *Paradise Lost*: "Some evil spirit attends/ Hovering and blazing with delusive light/ Misleads th'amaz'd night-wanderer from his way/ To bogs and mires, and oft through pond or pool/ There swallow'd up and lost…"

The phenomenon has a certain notoriety in UFO circles after events in Michigan and Ohio in 1966. Scientist Alan Hynek, who had been brought in by the Air Force to study a wave of UFO sightings, told a news conference that some of the sightings might have been swamp gas. Hynek was not attempting to dismiss all the UFOs, but to many it sounded like a feeble cover-up. Congressman Gerald Ford, later to become President, responded by calling for a congressional investigation, and 'swamp gas' became a byword for government attempts to brush off UFO sightings.

Isaac Newton mentions the *ignis fatuus* in his 1704 treatise on *Opticks*, and doubts that it actually burns: "The Ignis Fatuus is a Vapour shining without heat, and is there not the same difference between this Vapour and Flame, as between rotten Wood shining without heat and burning Coals of Fire?" Whether they were luminous or burning was a vexed question for centuries.

The lights were reported widely through Europe and North America, especially in marshes with standing water and on warm, still evenings. The flames are faint and have no real boundaries; they are usually yellow at the centre and bluish around the edges. They may appear at the level of the water or a few metres in the air, and may move around or persist in one spot for several minutes. As Newton noted, they do not give out any perceptible heat, though few people ever got close enough to find out, as the flames invariably flee from anyone chasing them.

Some of the best eyewitness accounts come from Major Louis Blesson, who investigated *ignis fatuus* on several occasions. His first encounter was in Gorbitz, near Dresden. Blesson noted bubbles of gas rising to the surface of the marsh in the daytime and thought they might be related to the lights at night. He returned to the same spot after dark: "To my great joy I actually observed bluish-purple flames, and did not hesitate to approach them. On reaching the spot they retired, and I pursued them in vain; all attempts to examine them closely were ineffectual."

JAMES JOEL / CREATIVE COMMONS

ABOVE: A contemporary photographic recreation of a Will o' the Wisp.

Several days later, Blesson returned. The flames withdrew, but if he stayed still they eventually returned. Blesson tried to light a piece of paper from the *ignis fatuus*, but his breath kept it away. Putting a cloth over his face he was able to get close enough to singe a sheet of paper. Then: "I next used a narrow slip of paper, and enjoyed the pleasure of seeing it take fire. The gas was evidently inflammable, and not a phosphorescent luminous one, as some have maintained."

Blesson carried out other tests, including igniting the gas to produce a small explosion followed by an unsteady blue flame about a metre tall. He later approached marsh-lights in Upper Silesia in Poland in 1811, on the border between the [modern] Czech Republic and Poland in 1812, and close to Minden near Hanover in 1814, but never managed to get as close as on the first occasion.

The general scientific view is that the lights are caused by an unknown combustion process, with decay gases being ignited spontaneously. Marsh gas consists of roughly two-thirds methane and one-third carbon dioxide, produced by rotting plant material. Methane is lighter than air, and burns with a blue-yellow flame. It is possible to create an artificial *ignis fatuus* by lighting bubbles of marsh gas, though the artificial version is unstable and burns out quickly, unlike the persistent dancing lights reported by observers.

The biggest question is what provides the spark. Elsewhere, spontaneous combustion – for example of haystacks and piles of wood shavings – happens when oxidation processes, started by bacteria, build up more and more heat until they reach a high enough temperature for flames to break out. This can only happen when the material is well insulated, which is impossible for gas in the air. The ignition was originally thought to have been caused by phosphine, sometimes produced by decay, but more recently it has been shown that phosphine itself does not self-combust. Scientists can only theorise that more complex phosphorus compounds, such as methyl phosphine, may be involved.

Josef Zychowski of the University of Cracow carried out a detailed chemical examination of the soil at a location where *ignis fatuus* had been seen repeatedly, the site of a WWII mass execution, in 2014. Zychowski suggests that bone remnants may be responsible for the production of phosphorus compounds, aided by bacteria from the human digestive system. So, the lights really might be 'corpse candles' or 'ghost lights' marking where the dead lie.

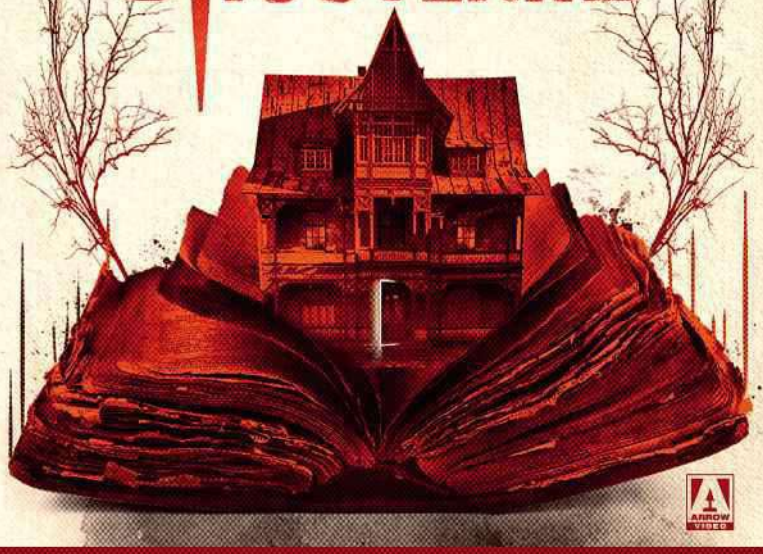
The biggest problem facing modern will o' the wisp hunters is that the phenomenon seems to have all but disappeared. Sightings, once common, are now rare. The draining and reclamation of marshland for farming is likely to be responsible. There is no known photograph of an *ignis fatuus*. One good scientific reading with a spectrometer might answer many questions about the chemical (or other) source of the light, but nobody has managed to take such a reading.

The will o'the wisp is used as a metaphor for something too elusive to catch, and, if chased, leads to ruin. Given the small chance of catching it, it is doubtful whether any scientists would now pursue this most fugitive of phenomena, so the *ignis fatuus* may remain forever unexplained.

FROM **PASCAL LAUGIER**
THE DIRECTOR OF **MARTYRS**

ESCAPE FROM YOUR NIGHTMARES

INCIDENT IN A GHOSTLAND



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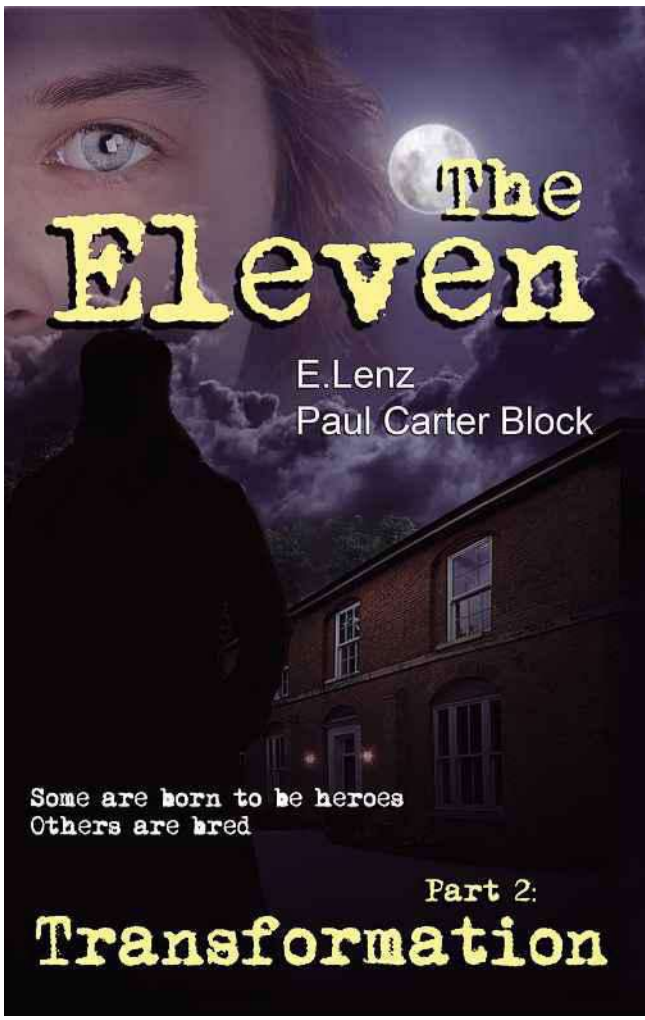


The Eleven

The war continues

Beneath the veneer of an unknowing world
two sides face each other in
eternal battle

The advantage swings from one to the other and each
asset has the potential
to be a weapon

Now, a new and crucial asset is predicted
to be revealed and the old adversaries fight for
its control

As before,
lost in the maelstrom of an approaching tempest,
oblivious, anxious and unwilling,
is Isolde Cadelle

Transformation

Part Two of
The Eleven
continues on Kindle

ARCHÆOLOGY A MONTHLY EXCAVATION OF ODDITIES AND ANTIQUITIES

PAUL DEVEREUX, Managing Editor of *Time & Mind*, digs up the latest archæological discoveries

THE VINDOLANDA TRUST

COURTESY NATIONAL MUSEUMS SCOTLAND

ABOVE LEFT: The solid bronze hand found near Hadrian's Wall. **ABOVE RIGHT**: Some of the intricately carved stone spheres. **BELOW**: How to put hats on Moai.

HAND OF GOD

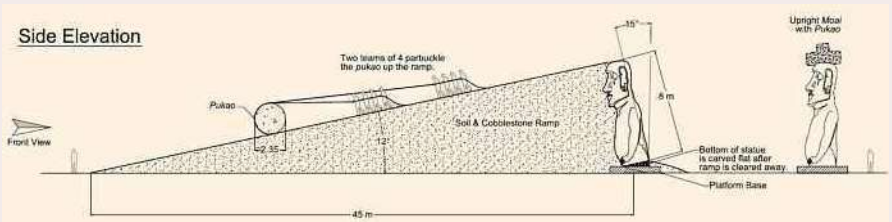
David Keys in the *Independent* broke the story of a fascinating find near Hadrian's Wall, the Roman structure (built AD 122-128) running 73 miles (117.5km) from sea to sea across a narrow part of northern England. It acted as defence against the tribes to the north, mainly those in what is now Scotland. The find was a solid bronze rendering of a hand, weighing some 5lb (2.3kg). It was uncovered from a boggy area near the Roman fort known as Vindolanda, just south of the wall, and considered to have been an offering to a Roman military god, Jupiter Dolichenus, in gratitude for a victory for what was apparently the "biggest combat operation ever in UK". The Romans had launched a military force some 50,000 strong on the tribes to the north on the pretext that they had reneged on a peace agreement. It was led by the emperor of the time, Septimius Severus, so was a major operation. Surprisingly, little detail is now known about this exceptional military invasion, which took place in AD 209-210 and reached far north in Scotland, but it seems to have been an appallingly bloody affair on both sides. The end result, however, was that many tribal confederations in Scotland were decimated by it. Ironically, this mass slaughter left a tribal lacuna in Scotland that was filled by the Picts, whom the Romans never tamed. *Independent, 28 June 2018.*

ARCHÆOLOGY WITH BALLS

We've mentioned these curious objects previously – Neolithic stone spheres roughly the size of cricket balls, so presumably meant to be hand-held. They are found mainly in Scotland and are truly mysterious. About 500 examples have been unearthed and their purpose is unknown, but the distinguishing feature of the most 'finished' of them is that they have been engraved with intricate linear markings and their varied shapes indicate sophisticated knowledge of 3-D geometry, specifically that of Platonic solids, many centuries before Plato. Whatever their use, it is their very form that tells of exceptional ancient knowledge, as architect Keith Critchlow has pointed out (in his *Time Stands Still*). Now, National Museums Scotland has created 3-D models of these stone balls using photogrammetry, and 60 are now available to the public online. This new, detailed imaging has revealed marks on some of the balls that had been hidden. *Archæology, LiveScience 18 June 2018.*

HAT TRICK

The Easter Island statues (*Moai*), some weighing up to 74 tons and standing as tall as a three-storey building, have given those who purvey fake ancient history news endless scope for spurious claims, for instance that they were moved from the quarries where they were cut and sculpted to where they now stand with the aid of alien technology. While archæological experiments with timber rollers initially didn't work, when researchers finally got around to using timber that was still green and slick, the stone effigies were moved along quite easily. Yes,



but, the True Believers insist, that doesn't explain how the colossal red stone hats (*pukao*) were placed on top of the effigies. These cylindrical hats were quarried from outcrops of red volcanic rock called scoria on the far side of the island, and the largest has a diameter of over 2m (7ft) and weighs nearly 11 tons.

Well, researchers from Penn State University have now figured out the mystery. They found that the cylindrical objects were rolled to the Moai sites – some had been abandoned on the journey in upright, wheel-like positions, allowing the researchers to see wear and tear markings giving further proof of transport by rolling. Similar notches, grooves and indentations suggest the Easter Islanders built ramps in front of forward-leaning Moai. They then rolled the hats up the ramps till they reached the top, before finally tipping the Moai upright. The researchers state that minimal effort and resources were required, using this technique. *BBC News, 18 June 2018.*

PERFECT IMPERFECTIONS

While we are considering ancient geometry, mathematician Peter Lynch draws our attention to the Parthenon (built 447-432 BC). It stands on the Acropolis in Athens as a gleaming expression of architectural perfection, but there is mathematical chicanery within its structure that enables that impression. It is a rectangular building, with the lengths of its long and shorter sides set to the root-five proportion (which is based on an 'irrational' ratio in that it is not equal to two whole numbers), while the façade is based on the proportions of the Golden Ratio (1.618 recurring ad infinitum) – which surveys have shown most people find to be the æsthetically most pleasing, whether they know about geometry or not. Lynch further points out that the "shape of the column shafts, and their slight tilt from the vertical, are said to correct optical distortions so that the building appears to be perfectly regular. The columns taper towards the top, but also swell slightly part of the way up, to avoid an impression of narrowing at the centre. The corner columns are marginally wider, to counteract another visual effect; without this adjustment, they would appear thinner than the inner columns". Moreover, the columns are not exactly equidistant, the outer ones being slightly closer together. Neither are they truly vertical – they slope ever so slightly inwards. "It has been estimated that the end columns, if continued upwards, would meet several kilometres above the Parthenon," Lynch claims. He rightly says that these skilful mathematical modifications show that the ancient Greeks had a "deep understanding of both geometry and the subtleties of human visual perception". *Irish Times, 21 June 2018.*

CLASSICAL CORNER

FORTEANA FROM THE ANCIENT WORLD
COMPILED BY BARRY BALDWIN

228: NOTIONAL HEALTH SERVICE

"Eclipses occur, and savages are frightened. The medicine men wave wands – the sun is cured – they did it" – Fort, *Books*, p1018, glossed thus by Martin Gardner, *Fads and Fallacies in the Name of Science* (1952): "Half the successes of medical quacks are exactly of this sort."

Best stick to the NHS (in my case, Canada Health). But, if you're 'into' alternative medicine, or simply tired of long waits and perfunctory attention at doctors' surgeries or emergency wards, you might want to consider these class(ical) home remedies.

Most come directly or indirectly from Pliny the Elder's *Natural History*, especially books 20-29, above all 26. Mary Beagon remarks (*Roman Nature: The Thought of Pliny the Elder*, 1992, p235): "His advocacy of herbal remedies shows Pliny at his least rational."

Reviewing Beagon's annotated translation of *NH* 7, Donald Laistner asks (*Bryn Mawr Classical Review* 2006.01.53 (online): "Would you entrust your fleet [Pliny was an admiral] to a man who thinks human saliva provides an antidote for snake-bites or that it will drive snakes to scamper off?"

Well, some years ago, one of Canada's main political parties was led by a man who believed the Earth was created (as per Archbishop Ussher) in 4004 BC, humans sharing the planet with dinosaurs. Laistner might have added that Pliny also thought snakes could detect adulterous wives, and that a quick fuck nullifies a bite's venom.

His contemporary Scribonius Largus (cf. Yours Truly, *Rheinisches Museum* 135, 1992, 74-82, available online) was one of emperor Claudius's doctors, albeit not the one who helped poison him with a toxic feather [**FT206:21**]. His book, *Compositiones*, is a lively mixture of memoir and medicine, kind of a Roman *Dr Finlay's Casebook*, though a Scottish doctor seems unlikely to emulate Largus's use of a dead gladiator's blood as an epilepsy cure with a sample from some deceased SPL warrior, nor would he/she have ready access to dried hyena skin to cure rabies, or the alternate cure of drinking water from a dead man's skull – "What has become of hydrophobia?", *Fort*, p1017.

You name it, Pliny has a remedy, thousands deployed throughout the *NH*, the present farrago capturing his teeming, sometimes chaotic, pages. Unnamed Roman princesses in his time ate venison daily to keep fever-free. The versatile Remora fish "hinders courtroom litigation" (doesn't say how), acts as aphrodisiac, and prevents miscarriages. Sneezing after sex is abortefacient – pity that wasn't known to the slave-girl who gave birth to a snake or Alcippe an elephant – script suggestions for *Call The Midwife*. Menstrual blood was an ubiquitous element, being conducive to blunting knives, blighting crops, killing insects, relieving boils and fevers, calming storms – did these properties inspire consul Mamercus Scaurus (Seneca, *De Beneficiis*, bk. ch 31) "to drink his slave-girls' menses by the mouthful" – followed by a cock-tail?

I wrote this just after Christmas-New Year, hence hangover cures were in the mind, but stick to our traditional hair-of-the-dog over Pliny's suggested eating of roasted bird-beaks or a three-day regimen of imbibing wine mixed with raw owls' eggs, the former also an Assyrian remedy if their other expedient of rubbing lemons into their armpits failed. The Græco-Roman cabbage cure (eating or rubbing yourself with it) likewise does not appeal.

Pliny became synonymous with such quackeries, inspiring two later anonymous collections (4th-6th centuries) bearing his name, subsequently a major source for Anglo-Saxon medicine; cf. Malcolm Cameron's homonymous book, 1993. Over 1,000 entries, carrying warnings against ignorant hucksters who peddle useless drugs at exorbitant prices – nowadays, these would be aimed at those inbox-clogging emails promising penis-extensions, all-night couplings, *et hoc genus omne*.

Their remedies for influenza include a nail used in a crucifixion, a boy's urine, and mouse-droppings. If these take your fancy, hasten to the Wikipedia notice of Medicina Plinii – I'm out of space. If reading all this has given you a headache, Pliny (28.12.49, 28.21.76) has two cures: tie a rope used in a suicide around your temples; failing that, use a woman's brassiere – Mammary Mia!

" A disease runs its course... and then disappears – whiter by the poisoned teat of a cow or the dried sore of a mummy." – Fort, *Books*, p1018

EXHIBITION REPORT

JAMES HENRY PULLEN | INMATE – INVENTOR – GENIUS

James Henry Pullen spent most of his life in lunatic asylums, where he produced a number of astonishing models and artworks. DAVID V BARRETT reports on a fascinating exhibition exploring the creations of this 'Mad Genius'

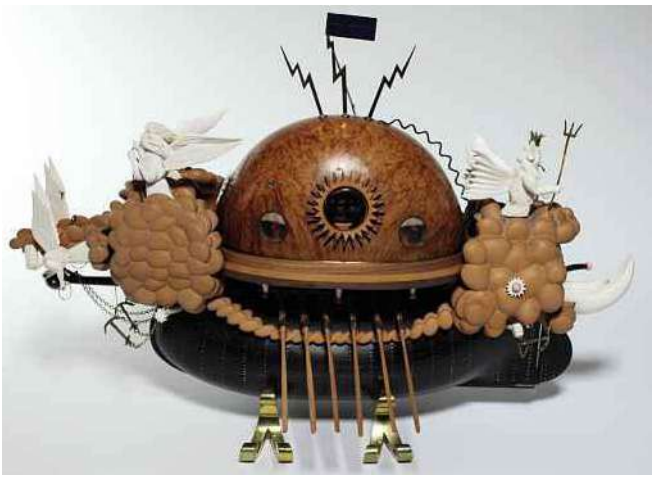
James Henry Pullen (c.1835-1916) was the ultimate outsider artist, yet very much in tune with his times.

Unable to string words together into a sentence, he didn't graduate from toddler-skirts to trousers ("breeching", which usually happened at two or three) until he was nine, and spent all his life from the age of 12 in asylums. Yet he was a genius with his hands, creating amazingly detailed models, both perfect replicas of real ships and amazing flights of the imagination.

"No other instance is recorded of so fine a talent for design, or so great a skill of mechanism, being found among the inmates of an asylum," said an 1898 article in *Pearson's Magazine*, "A Mad Genius: The Master Craftsman of Earlswood Asylum". "One sees at a glance that here is no common type of man or mind. Of a genial personality with a spare but energetic frame, he has dreamy blue eyes of a seer-like look. His head, with its long grizzled hair, is imaginative and well-shaped."

Pullen had moved to the Asylum for Idiots at Hampton Wick in south west London when it opened in 1855; the foundation stone was laid by Prince Albert, who reportedly took an interest in Pullen's early work. Its name later changed to the Royal Earlswood Institution for Mental Defectives. Attitudes towards the mentally ill and emotionally disturbed were much harsher then than today. The Asylum – later to have the less offensive name of the Royal Earlswood Hospital – was run by a young doctor called John Langdon Down, after whom Down's Syndrome is named. Langdon Down had a revolutionary attitude towards those under his care; he treated them as people.

ABOVE: James Henry Pullen photographed in his admiral's uniform in the 1880s.
BELOW: *Queen Victoria's State Barge*, 1866-7, various woods, metal, string.



He banned punishment of the inmates, taught them horse riding, gardening, crafts and elocution, and set up an early form of occupational therapy, making boots, bonnets and baskets which were sold to raise funds for the asylum. He quickly recognised that the young Pullen, despite his communication and social problems, was a gifted craftsman, and employed him to make furniture for the asylum.

Terminology changes: once seen as an "idiot savant", Pullen would probably be diagnosed today as severely autistic, his condition exacerbated by severe hearing difficulties.

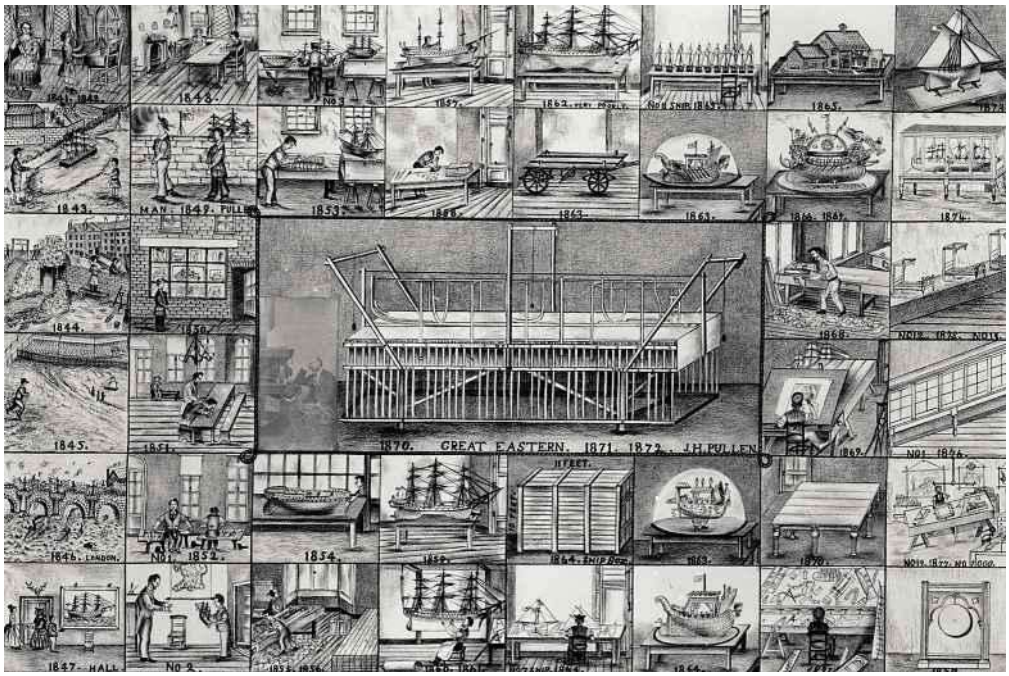
Pullen's greatest achievement, the stunning 10-ft (3m) long replica of Isambard Kingdom Brunel's *SS Great Eastern* (1874), took him six years to make (he hand-made every rivet and screw himself); it has a series of ornate state rooms which can be removed and examined. It's displayed at the Langdon Down Museum of Learning Disability on the site of the asylum where Pullen lived and worked.

An exhibition at the Watts Gallery near Guildford focuses instead on his smaller creations, showcasing some of his astonishing, even bizarre work, including several ships of the imagination. And though he could barely speak, these boats show a keen interest in the world around him.

The *Dream Barge* (1863) has feathers along the sides, curving up into wings for sails, and a snake as the tiller. A crowned head in the bows emerges from the ship as if it's alive, not just a figurehead; it's oddly reminiscent of the living dragon heads of the liveships in Robin Hobbs's fantasy novels well over a century later. The barge is said to be Pullen's vision of Queen Victoria's transport to the afterlife; Prince Albert's unexpected death in December 1861 was still recent.

Even more fantastical is the *State Barge* (1867), a model of a floating office from which Queen Victoria could rule the British Empire. Looking more like a flying saucer than a boat,

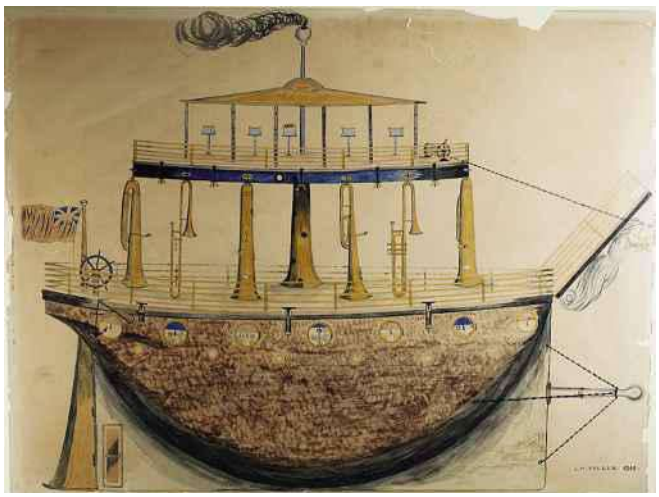
ALL IMAGES COURTESY LANGDON DOWN MUSEUM OF LEARNING DISABILITY



it's pulled forward by ivory angels, while a Satanic figure with a trident is at the rear, perhaps trying to hold it back. As well as the supernatural figures it has two other power sources: there are conventional oars at the sides, while lightning bolts on top suggest the possibility of electrical power. Just the year before, in 1866, engineers on the *SS Great Eastern* successfully laid the first telegraph cable across the Atlantic.

A third model boat is the puzzling *Rotary Barge* (1898), with its multiple masts and sails, which would cause it to go around in circles, and its odd paddle-like constructions below the surface. It's recently been restored, and its conservator suggests it may have been a practical demonstration model showing a solution to a navigation problem – clearing mud and silt from canals and other waterways.

One boat Pullen designed but apparently never made was the *Musical Barge*; his drawing of it in the exhibition shows his humour. Its hull is a drum (Pullen's own instrument in Earlswood's brass band), with a bandstand-like structure topped with a cymbal supported by tubas and trombones. This is a steam-powered boat – black smoke emerges from a smokestack in the middle of the cymbal.



TOP: *Pictorial Autobiography*, c.1878, pencil on paper. **ABOVE**: *Design for a 'Musical Boat'*, 1869, pencil and bodycolour on paper. **LEFT**: *Drawing of 'The Giant'* (inside view), late 1860s or early 1870s, pencil on paper.

Pullen was entranced by boats and by anything maritime. There's a story that he once asked to be discharged from Earlswood so he could marry. Rather than refusing outright, the hospital's board offered him an admiral's uniform and a "commission" in the Navy. Pullen "never afterwards alluded to the subject of marriage" and proudly wore his uniform "on ceremonial occasions".

The exhibition also has a full-sized replica of one of Pullen's strangest creations, a nearly 14-ft (4m) high giant which he would climb inside, manipulating levers to move the arms, the head, even the eyes, eyelids, ears and tongue; its mechanical larynx produced "a huge roar" and "unearthly shrieks and formidable coughs", terrifying local children.

The intricate work shown in his boats reached a beautiful delicacy in the ivory brooches and tie-pins he made, selling them in local pubs in the evening for 2/6d to 3/6d – a sizeable amount at the time for jewellery for ordinary folks.

The most poignant testimony to Pullen's life is his pictorial *Autobiography* (1878). Forty small panels in an almost comic strip format, illustrating significant points in his life from the age of seven (when he was already making model boats), surround a much larger panel showing not his masterpiece, the *SS Great Eastern*, but the huge cradle he built to support it while he was building it. For someone who could barely communicate in speech or writing, the *Autobiography* is a remarkable statement from his own perspective of his greatest achievements and his most prized creations in his first 40 years. The images include his carpentry for the asylum, his scale models and his more fantastical creations.

The word "genius" was often applied to Pullen in his lifetime. When they visited Earlswood in 1869, Edward, Prince of Wales and Princess Alexandra noted "the genius of the institution, the inmate Pullen". James Henry Pullen lived and worked at Earlswood until his death in 1916, outliving by 20 years the visionary doctor who ran the asylum with such kindness.

James Henry Pullen: Inmate – Inventor – Genius is at the Watts Gallery, Guildford, until 28 October.

LANGDON DOWN MUSEUM OF LEARNING DISABILITY

GHOSTLY PHOTOS

A black monk in a Kentish castle, a phantom playmate in a Northumberland park and an uninvited passenger in a car

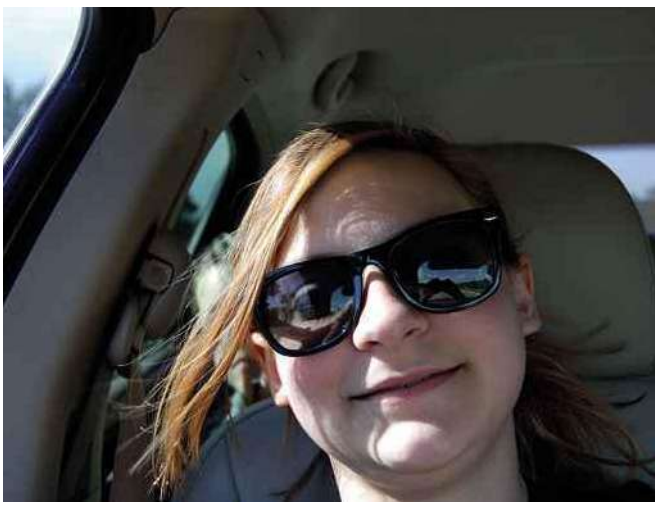
BLACK MONK SNAPPED

Last January, Jon Wickes, 50, and his son Harry, 12, visited Eynsford Castle in Kent, where they took some photographs. In one of these appeared an eerie black-hooded figure. They had not noticed anyone around when the photo was taken.

Mr Wickes said that, according to local legend, a black monk has been spotted in the area before. In 1130, William de Eynsford, who held the castle for the Archbishop of Canterbury, allegedly retired to become a monk. "My little boy had history homework so that's why we went there," said Mr Wickes. "We only went to take a few pictures because he wanted to know how a castle was built. I saw the image with the figure in it and looked on the web. That's when I read about a monk being seen in the area. I asked a paranormal investigator what he thought and he went down there to check it out.

"When I posted the image online on a paranormal group, there were suggestions that it was just a hole in the wall, but someone has actually gone there to take pictures and confirm that's not the case. I'm not sure if it's a ghost or not. I'm never really freaked out by that sort of stuff. At first, I wondered if it was just a trick of the light… I've had a few supernatural experiences in the past. I had a motorcycle accident in 1995 and died and was brought back to life. When I lay there and died, I saw my grandfather telling me to go back to the other side. You never know; it might have been because I was on a lot of morphine."

Alan Tigwell, who visited the castle on 18 January at Mr Wickes's request, said: "I've been investigating the paranormal for over 20 years. There wasn't anything in the castle itself that could explain that picture… In terms of the history of the castle, there was nothing specifically about a monk living there that I could find, but I do believe one of the families who owned it had a son who left to become a monk." *dailymail.co.uk, 24 Jan 2018.*



TOP: The black-hooded figure snapped at Eynsford Castle. **CENTRE:** Byrin Watson and phantom playmate. **BOTTOM:** Harper Kurtz and the back seat ghost.

IT'S BEHIND YOU!

Laura Watson, 39, had been enjoying a day with her family at Plessey Woods Country Park in Northumberland when she took this photograph of her nine-year-old son Byrin on 28 May 2018. After noticing the ghostly figure on the back seat, she said: "Me and my daughter couldn't even go to sleep last night because we were so scared. I didn't believe in anything like that until I saw this for myself." The medical receptionist insists no one had been behind Byrin when she took the photo of him standing in front of a tree. It was only when the family got home and was looking through her snaps that she realised something appeared to be there. "It looks like a child to me, I don't know if it's a girl or a boy," she said. "But I can see this face and it looks like the hand is on my son's shoulder, which is very bizarre… Some people have said I must have Photoshopped it, as they can't believe it. But I've explained that I wouldn't even have a clue how to do anything like that. It was taken on my phone. I'm rubbish with technology and I'm just not the kind of person to do that…. I don't know much about the history of the woods but some people are saying that many moons ago a young boy drowned in the river. You don't know if it's just hearsay." *Sun, 30 May 2018.*

MERCURY PRESS AND MEDIA

KENNEDY NEWS AND MEDIA

HARPER KURTZ / MERCURY PRESS

BACK SEAT GHOST

While Harper Kurtz, 13, was being driven last July to a beauty pageant near Orlando, Florida, by her mother Melissa Kurtz, 48, she took some selfies to pass the time. A month later Mrs Kurtz was looking through the pictures and spotted a selfie Harper had taken in the car, which showed the head of a boy in the background – a boy who wasn't in the car the day the picture was taken. Mrs Kurtz did some research on the road they were driving on that day and discovered that there had been an accident on that same road and the day she and Harper were driving on it happened to be the anniversary of the death that occurred because of it – which sounds rather too close to the standard phantom hitchhiker trope to be entirely credible. "Where the picture was taken there was an automobile accident one year ago exactly," said Mrs Kurtz. "When I looked into it, someone had been medevacked away in a helicopter. However, they would not tell me any specific details, which leads me to believe that it was a child, as that might be why they couldn't provide the information."

Mrs Kurtz added: "Ever since Harper was little she has had paranormal things revolve around her. She often has orbs appear in pictures next to her. Once when she was younger I found her drawing on the window and when I researched them it turned out they were glyphs about the archangel Raphael and how he banished the demon Asmodeus to hell. Harper seems to pick up the energy. She has amazing positive energy so maybe spirits are attracted to her."

Mrs Kurtz sent the photo to Greg Pocha, "director of parapsychology, afterlife and paranormal studies" at the Eidolon Project Canada, who suggested that the spectral boy had appeared to warn Harper to wear a seat belt. (According to her mother, the stubborn girl habitually failed to belt up). *dailymail.co.uk, 14 Nov 2016.*

ABOVE AND BELOW: Some of the items in Neil Packer's Haunted Antiques Paranormal Research Centre in Hinckley, where visitors are encouraged to have hands-on experiences with a variety of spooky objects.

HAUNTED ANTIQUES

Neil Packer has opened the Haunted Antiques Paranormal Research Centre in Hinckley, southwest Leicestershire. Although there are a few similar shops in the US, he believes his is the first in the UK. He has haunted items on display for those who want to study them or the curious who just want to see what it's like to sit in a haunted rocking chair holding a haunted doll in a haunted building. He claims that objects can absorb the energy – both positive and negative – of their owners or of people who handle them. These include dolls (Robert and Annabelle), paintings (such as "The Hands Resist Him"), containers (the Dybbuk Box), mirrors (The Myrtles Plantation's Mirror) and clothing.

Parker began collecting haunted antiques in 2017 and moved them from his home when there was not enough space and too many ghosts. It seemed natural that he would want a haunted building for his centre. A trip around Hinckley with fellow investigators brought him to a building on Regent Street where a medium sensed spirits. Packer allows visitors to get involved with the objects – touching, sitting on, lying in, riding, etc. – and then encourages them to record their experiences in a log. There's also a room to discuss the day's paranormal experiences with other visitors. The centre's Facebook page <https://www.facebook.com/pg/hauntedresearch/photos/?ref=page_internal> has a selection of photographs of the objects. Packer is looking for more objects and plans to hold overnight events. *Leicestershire Mercury via mysteriousuniverse.org, 27 Feb 2018.*

SPECIAL REPORT

BURNING QUESTIONS: THE NOLAN INQUEST

The demise of John Nolan, found ablaze on a London street in 2017, prompted speculation about Spontaneous Human Combustion. FT's legal eagle ALAN MURDIE reports on the recent inquest into the unexplained death.

ABOVE: The author's father recalled a case in which a woman's body was found reduced to ashes above the thighs; this photograph of a 69-year-old woman found dead in Hammersmith, west London, in 1958 shows something very similar.

Being the son of a fireman and greatly intrigued by all aspects of forteana, it is perhaps inevitable that I would take an interest in the alleged phenomenon of Spontaneous Human Combustion (SHC). Claims of deaths caused by SHC are rare, and inquests into them even rarer. Thus, when an inquest was announced into the unexplained death suffered by John Nolan, 71, found ablaze in a north London street in September 2017 and duly prompting media speculation of SHC (see **FT362:4**), I realised here was a possibly unique opportunity to observe the official processes in operation with this disputed subject. Being also a lawyer, and conscious of criticism directed by certain authors [1] against coroners when faced with examples of postulated SHC, I duly resolved to attend, observe and record these proceedings at Barnet Coroner's Court.

I once asked my late father Keith Murdie (1938-2015) if he had ever seen anything resembling SHC in his career with the Suffolk Fire Service between 1962 and 1992. He told me he once attended a small domestic fire at a cottage at Brandon in West Suffolk, and discovered a body reduced entirely to ashes, save for the legs below the thighs, and with little surrounding fire damage. However, he did not want to be drawn on the matter. When I asked what he thought about such cases, all he would remark was: "Fire is strange". A former senior officer from the same division also recalled seeing a similar case at Ipswich in the late 1950s; the town where over two centuries earlier, in 1744, a local woman, Grace Pett, had allegedly been reduced to ashes in an unexplained fire. [2]

John Nolan had been seen alive and burning in the street

The mysterious death of John Nolan, a 70-year-old retired building worker, differed from these stories; it was not a case of the body being found mysteriously consumed, for he had been seen alive and burning in the street. He was born on 9 June 1947 in Co Mayo, Ireland, and had been living in England for over 30 years, his last address being in Tenterden Road, Tottenham, N17. On the morning of 17 September 2017, he left his home for a walk. At around 1pm, Anna Kay saw flames near the William House flats in Orchard Place. Initially believing a refuse bin had been set on fire, she then realised it was actually the body of a man ablaze, leant up against a fence, and called the emergency services. The fire brigade and the police were dispatched, with PC Damien Ait-Amer being the first respondent, arriving on the scene at 1:05pm. He was followed by Neil Richard Murre of the London Fire Brigade who assessed the situation and, after an initial examination of Nolan's condition, promptly called up an air ambulance to convey the casualty to Mid Essex Hospital (a specialist burns hospital). Here, surgeon Neil Martin [3] examined Nolan, finding he had sustained over 60 per cent burns to his body and was in a critical condition. Nolan never revived, being pronounced dead at 6pm the next day, 18 September. His death was attributed to severe burns. The mystery was how he had come to suffer these, simply walking in the street.

The fire brigade handed over the investigation to the police on 25 September. Police inquiries began the next day but after two months they remained at a loss to explain the tragedy, and put out a public appeal for information. A suggestion voiced in the *Daily Telegraph* that it might prove to be a case of 'spontaneous combustion' [4] provoked wide interest on-line, with the deputy editor of *Skeptical Inquirer* in the US posting a statement that such a thing did not exist. [5] Thus, controversy over the death was well underway before the inquest opened. The proceedings took place in two stages before the Senior Coroner, Judge Andrew Walker. Stage one opened at Barnet

Coroner's Court, on 13 March 2018, attended by relatives of Nolan and the media.

Understandably, the primary concern of Nolan's family was discovering just how he came to die. Unfortunately, like so many involved in legal proceedings today, they lacked legal aid or representation and were forced to represent themselves. Well appreciating their predicament, the Coroner explained certain procedural technicalities and stated that various professionals who attended the scene and who had been responsible for the care of Nolan could be called as witnesses. It emerged the family had been troubled by the lack of information supplied by the police and by certain lines of enquiry pursued. These included suggestions, at an early stage, that Nolan was schizophrenic, suicidal and/or had criminal connections with occupiers of the flats where he lived; in particular some police notes dated 8 October 2017 referred to him as "the suspect" rather than "the victim". Wanting to refute these impressions, they remained concerned about the thoroughness of the police enquiries, particularly into the fire itself. A further concern was whether both the fire and injuries had been aggravated by an accelerant, such as petrol or another flammable liquid. The lack of information and clarity over this made them suspicious that detectives had headed off at tangents on the basis of unattributed misinformation, duly impeding the search for the truth. They hoped the inquest would now clarify everything for them, and reject any suggestion John Nolan had committed suicide. Emphasis on addressing these concerns – which can only have intensified when it was announced the police report on the fire was still not completed – shaped the subsequent course of the inquest.

Following directions from the Coroner, the Nolan family identified each witness they wished called to give evidence in person (all other evidence to be read). Among witnesses

TOP: John Nolan. **ABOVE**: Orchard Place, Tottenham, north London, the street where Mr Nolan was found mysteriously ablaze and in a critical condition.

deemed not needed in person were the medical personnel involved in the examination and treatment of Nolan's burns, either from the London Ambulance Service who first attended him, or from the Mid-Essex-Hospital where he died. No detailed questions were therefore put as to the existence or otherwise of any physiological peculiarities with the burns and injuries. The date of 22 May was fixed for a full hearing, giving the opportunity for the police to complete their report. The full inquest opened at 10am on that day before Judge Andrew Walker, and I am grateful to Mr Mian Zeesham Chaudry, barrister, for detailed notes kept on this part of the proceedings.

The victim was formally identified as Mr John Nolan – a retired construction worker of Tenterden Road, Tottenham. Dr Sebastian, Nolan's GP, said Nolan suffered from perivascular and gastric conditions and had undergone a hernia operation. These severely affected his health and reduced his mobility, leading to him needing care supplied by his younger brother, Jimmy Nolan. The latter confirmed last seeing his brother alive on the morning of 17 September 2017 just before he set out for a walk, around 11am. Jimmy Nolan stated that on that morning his brother presented no signs of any suicidal thoughts or any intention to commit any reckless act; nor had he made any suicide attempts in the past.

Similarly, the report compiled by the police (from medical records) revealed no evidence or warning indicators of suicidal intentions, leading detectives to rule out an act of suicide or self-harm. The investigation was led by Metropolitan police detective Mr Edward, assisted by PC Damien Ait-Amer and LFB officer Neil Richard Murre who had been the first from the emergency services to arrive. The witness statement from Anna Kay, read to the court, confirmed she had not seen anyone else fleeing the scene immediately before or after the fire. Police inquiries had found nothing suggesting involvement by any third party.

Significantly, both GP records and Jimmy Nolan confirmed that John Nolan was a regular smoker. Jimmy Nolan stated he was always reminding his brother to be careful when lighting his cigarettes. Forensic enquiries had looked for evidence of accelerants, but no traces were found either at, or close to, the fire scene. It was observed that if an accelerant was used, traces of it, or its spillage, would have been detected on Nolan's clothes.

Searching John Nolan's home, detectives found a container with white spirit by a sofa where he was presumed to have been sitting before leaving home. This raised suspicions about the use of an accelerant in starting or aggravating the fire. However, Jimmy Nolan had informed the detectives the white spirit had simply been used in repair work at home, a day before his brother died. Consequently, the police concluded the death resulted from a tragic accidental fire that started when Nolan had stopped to light a cigarette with one of his two lighters.

But just how had this fire become so intense? Forensic evidence taken from the scene by PC Ait-Amer included John Nolan's jacket, jeans, shoes, inner-clothing, and undergarments, all submitted for examination by a forensic scientist, Sara Jane Griffiths. Her evidence was given direct to the court. She confirmed

SPECIAL REPORT

PHILARENZY / CREATIVE COMMONS

TOP: North London Coroner's Court in Barnet, where the inquest took place; SHC was not specifically considered as a possible cause of death, but this does not mean that coroners are not covering it up, as has sometimes been alleged.

receiving the garments and found within them highly combustible synthetic materials. She considered this particular combination of clothing, if worn together, presented a very high prospect of fire acceleration, greater than if worn individually. However, she conducted no separate tests to verify this.

Nolan's sister Sandra raised two objections to this evidence, asking why experimental tests had not been carried out, along with further tests of her brother's shoes and undergarments. Ms Griffiths replied that she considered there was no need to conduct such tests because they were able to reach the conclusion that this amalgamation of clothes, with the presence of synthetic material in all of the three types tested, was sufficient for report purposes. Further analysis to test this deduction was then deemed unnecessary.

The second objection raised by Sandra Nolan concerned the packaging of her brother's clothes in paper bags instead of plastic bags, arguing that paper bags could not have possibly contained or retained the smell of any accelerant used. The scientist responded that she didn't know why the clothing was packed in paper bags rather than plastic. However, she believed the smell of any such possible accelerant, including white spirit, would not have gone undetected; in her opinion if there had been accelerant employed there was a high possibility of such a smell being detected and the use of plastic/nylon bags could not have made any significant difference. These answers were accepted.

Based upon the evidence received, the Judge found no evidence of suicide and "no involvement of any third party into the ignition of the fire". Having established that Nolan suffered "limited mobility and impaired consciousness", he determined the fire to have been "accidentally lit" from the lighter or by "a used cigarette" accidentally returned to his jacket or pocket and which then "ignited his synthetic clothing". It was further concluded that "there were no evidence of any accelerant" present or of any "external causes" behind the fire.

There was little prospect that SHC would become an issue

From all the evidence produced, the conclusion was John Nolan "suffered severe burns due to accidental ignition of his clothing". He suffered impaired consciousness due to his weak health and medical conditions that had reduced his ability to be aware of his surroundings and possible risks. Nolan had accidentally set himself alight and his death ruled a "tragic accident". Thus, the official verdict was that John Nolan came by his death as a result of an accident caused by way of "consequential accidental ignition of clothing".

So – SHC case closed?

Officially, yes. These findings at the inquest concluded the matter, without SHC being specifically considered or raised. The Coroner's Court limited itself to considering such evidence as was before it in an admissible form, and the focus of the process, reflecting the concerns of Nolan's family, further narrowed the scope of the inquiries pursued.

The narrow focus of this inquest means that no probing questions on the nature of the 60 per cent burns suffered by Nolan were pursued; similarly, the adequacy of the circular explanation given for the ignition of clothing was not explored in the absence of actual tests. In the absence of other witnesses, or any answers elicited from further cross-examination, no other material was available for consideration.

Nothing was apparent to myself or another legal observer that any technical defects occurred during the conduct of proceedings by the Judge, nor in the way he reached his conclusions based upon, and wholly limited to, the evidence presented. He treated all participants with courtesy and correctly addressed the evidence produced by each witness. From what we observed and recorded, the law was thus correctly followed. What's more, the victim's relatives, via a family member, told journalists they were satisfied the inquest had resolved the puzzle of how he had died.

No challenge or appeal has been lodged – so (short of some wholly striking and significant evidence coming to light) there are no grounds for interfering with this judgment. In fact, observing the course and form of proceedings and the evidence presented, there was little prospect that SHC would actually become an issue. No obligation rested upon those discharging judicial or statutory responsibilities to consider SHC in this context, raise it on their own initiative or respond to any media speculation if the hypothesis was not formally

placed before the court.

Effectively, what this case succeeds in illustrating is that inquest procedures, as they currently operate, cannot be expected to deliver a process for proving whether deaths can arise from spontaneous combustion, or even recognise this postulated phenomenon. This is not because of the attitude of coroners, but because of structural barriers, built into the nature of the inquest process itself.

Whilst a full analysis of the law is beyond the scope of this article, it should be remembered SHC is an hypothesis, not a matter of fact. Inquests conducted under the Coroners and Justice Act 2009 are not held for determining if SHC, or any other disputed phenomenon, exists. Whilst a coroner may in certain cases order a special post mortem examination of a body, [6] the inquest court is not a testing laboratory or a place to rebut scientific models. It cannot rule upon the existence of SHC, or the validity of any other hypothesis, one way or another.

Procedures confine the inquest to being a narrow fact-finding inquiry into an unexplained death, limited only to establishing reliable answers to certain important but factual areas, including "The identity of the deceased", "How, when and where the deceased came by his or her death" and the particulars of registration of the death. [7] The option of holding a post-mortem examination is a matter of discretion and is not obligatory. [8]

Most inquests revolve around the question – as in the case of John Nolan – how the deceased came to die? However, the task is not ascertaining how the deceased actually died (which might raise general and far-reaching issues) but "how… the deceased came by his death," a more limited technical question. [9] At an inquest there can be no objection to any verdict incorporating a brief, neutral, factual statement as issued here; e.g. "The deceased

was killed when his car was run down by an express train on a level crossing"; such a verdict must be strictly factual.

More significantly, neither the Senior Coroner conducting an investigation into a person's death nor the jury (if applicable) is permitted to express opinions on any matter, outside the facts and evidence before them. [10] Obviously, evidence cannot be obtained from witnesses who are not either called or not questioned if present.

Other forms of judicial proceedings into the causes of death and destruction in the context of unexplained fires are possible (e.g. the current Grenfell Towers Inquiry, civil insurance litigation and criminal proceedings for arson). But with its restriction to establishing a limited set of facts, rather than testing hypotheses, inquests in England and Wales, as currently organised, cannot be expected to yield answers concerning the existence of SHC now or in the future. (Press reports in 2011 claimed that a coroner in the Republic of Ireland had declared the death of Michael Faherty might be a case SHC – see **FT281:14-15** – but the exact wording of his judgment would need checking.)

Furthermore, the Nolan inquest also demonstrated that investigation into a mysterious death by fire in England and Wales is a fragmented process, essentially involving a series of separated exercises and steps by largely autonomous investigators, each acting, in part, upon received information and largely independently. This is a safeguard within the system, but equally the overall scope of the inquiries will be limited. Unless SHC is specifically raised by an expert, there is little prospect it would be examined as a possibility and the coroner is prohibited from expressing any opinion. Such fragmentation further results in the isolated and anecdotal nature of testimony regarding cases of suspected SHC reported over the years. Furthermore, as this case illustrated, the course of proceedings may also be influenced by particular views expressed by relatives who will bring differing concerns, priorities and perspectives to the process.

Personally, concerning specifically human spontaneous combustion, I am a lukewarm agnostic, veering towards scepticism. But I think these points worth making on the inquest process because of the aforementioned criticism of coroners that has appeared in the limited literature of SHC (notably Michael Harrison's eccentric *Fire From Heaven*, 1976). In practice, there is no conspiracy to cover up SHC by coroners; restrictions on enquiries are built into, and arise from, the actual structure of the inquest process itself.

However, whilst there was nothing in the evidence to suggest that SHC was involved, I will record for devotees of the lore surrounding SHC and with a nod to the spirit of forteana, one peculiar phonetic synchronicity which emerged. [11] Following the verdict on 22 May, the person speaking on behalf of the family regarding the cause of the fatal burns suffered by John Nolan was his nephew, Kevin Byrne. [12] Probably, this would not be worthy of note but for the odd coincidence that six weeks earlier, on 13 March, when the same name cropped up. It appeared in the Court List that same morning, in a separate case immediately preceding the first hearing (slightly delaying its opening). Before the inquest into the cause of the fire and John Nolan's strange burns could start, the Coroner found himself looking into the case of a deceased gentleman called 'Mr Byrne'. [13]

NOTES

1 Michael Harrison, *Fire From Heaven: A Study of Spontaneous Combustion in Human Beings* (Pan, 1976); John E Heymer, *The Entrancing Flame* (Little, Brown and Co, 1996).

2 GR Clarke, *The History and Description of the Town and Borough of Ipswich*, 1884; Enid Porter, *The Folklore of East Anglia,* 1974, the case being associated traditionally with witchcraft. See also Peter Christie: "The Grace Pett SHC: a re-examination", **FT35:6-10**.

3 One of several medical staff, including an ambulance crew and hospital staff named but not called who had care of Mr Nolan at various stages.

4 "Did pensioner spontaneously combust? Bafflement surrounds 'horrific' death", *D.Telegraph,* 15 Dec 2017.

5 "So what's the truth about this spontaneous combustion story going round?", http://skepticreview.com/tag/john-nolan/, 15 Dec 2017.

6 See the Coroners and Justice Act 2009 and the Coroners (Investigations) Regulations 2013 (SI 2013/1629).

7 Section 5(1) Coroners and Justice Act 2009.

8 Coroners (Investigations) Regulations 2013 (SI 2013/1629); Coroners Rules 1984 SI 1984/552; refusal to hold such a post-mortem would have to be considered wholly unreasonable to be challenged in law.

9 *R v. H.M. Coroner for North Humberside and Scunthorpe, Ex parte Jamieson* - [1994] 3 WLR 82 at 100.

10 Section 5(3) Coroners and Justice Act 2009.

11 Alleged phonetic and other synchronicities in cases of SHC were claimed by Michael Harrison in *Fire From Heaven* and demolished by Bob Rickard in **FT16:24-26** and **FT23:26-28**. See also "Building a Fortean Library 30: Phew! What a Scorcher!", **FT364:56-57**.

12 "Mayo-born pensioner died after accidentally igniting his clothes", *Irish Times*, 22 May 2018.

13 Barnet Coroner's Court *Listing,* week beginning 12 Mar 2018.

MORE SONIC ATTACKS?

Another outbreak of mystery symptoms among US Government staff, this time in Guangzhou, China

ABOVE: The US Consulate in Guangzhou, which opened in 2013, where a number of US Government employees have experienced headaches, insomnia and worse.

CHINA CRISIS

In late May 2018, the US issued a health alert to US citizens in China after one of its consulate workers in the city of Guangzhou suffered a mild traumatic brain injury (MTBI), similar to a string of mysterious medical problems among US diplomats in Cuba recently [**FT359:22, 360:14, 363:4, 366:8**]. Secretary of state Mike Pompeo said that the employee suffered symptoms that were "very similar and entirely consistent with the medical indications of the Americans working in Havana".

State Department spokeswoman Heather Nauert said a medical team would be in Guangzhou at the end of May "to conduct baseline medical evaluations of all consulate Guangzhou employees who request it". US embassy spokeswoman Jinnie Lee said: "The department is taking this incident very seriously and is working to determine the cause and impact of the incident. The Chinese government has assured us they are also investigating and taking appropriate measures."

The employee working in Guangzhou, whose symptoms of "subtle and vague, but abnormal, sensations of sound and pressure" lasted from late 2017 through to April 2018, was sent to the US for medical evaluation. On 18 May, according to Nauert, the Beijing embassy "learned that the clinical findings of this evaluation were similar to what might be seen in a patient with head concussion or mild traumatic brain injury". The Embassy advised Americans experiencing "unusual acute auditory or sensory phenomena accompanied by unusual sounds or piercing noises" not to attempt to locate the source of the sound but to move away from the location and seek medical help.

On 8 June, the US Embassy in China sent a second alert to its citizens over unexplained health issues that prompted the evacuation of a number of US government employees working at the Guangzhou consulate. This urged Americans to report any "unusual, unexplained physical symptoms or events, auditory or sensory phenomena, or other health concerns." It called for people to be attentive of symptoms including "dizziness, headaches, tinnitus, fatigue, cognitive issues, visual problems, ear complaints and hearing loss, and difficulty sleeping." Nauert said "a number of individuals" had been brought to the US, but didn't reveal how many were affected or evacuated.

He heard sounds like "marbles bouncing and hitting the floor"

One of the evacuated was Mark Lenzi, a security engineering officer at the consulate, who lived in the same complex as the first employee to be affected. Lenzi had been hearing sounds like "marbles bouncing and hitting the floor" since April 2017. That was followed by excruciating headaches and insomnia, symptoms his family also experienced. When he brought his concerns to his superiors, he was prescribed painkillers. China said it has uncovered no information that could point to a cause. Meanwhile, two more US diplomats in Havana with symptoms were sent to the University of Pennsylvania for testing.

The China incidents affect one of the most important of the seven US diplomatic outposts in the country. The Guangzhou consulate opened months after the establishment of diplomatic relations between Beijing and Washington in 1979 and moved to its new purpose-built facility in 2013. It serves four southern provinces with a combined population of more than 204 million and processes more than a million visa applications of all types annually. It is also the only US diplomatic installation in China authorised to process immigrant visas and handle adoptions. *theguardian.com, BBC News, 23 May; [AP] Guardian, 8 June; sciencemag.org, 20 June 2018.*

CUBAN CRICKETS

Last January, after an investigation that included fieldwork in Havana, the FBI found no evidence for an attack with powerful energy beams, but the Department of Defense was giving the possibility a closer look. US Navy acoustic expert Kurt Yankaskas, who runs the noise-induced hearing loss programme at the Office of Naval Research in Arlington, Virginia, thinks an energy weapon is a possibility, although "it would have to have been tight-beamed and high frequency". One candidate, he said, is so-called hypersonic sound, generated by the interference of ultrasonic waves, which the Navy has evaluated as a means of communicating on deafening aircraft carrier decks. Whatever the symptoms' cause, only a minority of embassy staff were stricken.

Other researchers and physicians maintain that mass psychogenic illness could explain some, if not all, of the symptoms. A panel of Cuban scientists that evaluated US evidence and gathered its own data concluded in December 2017 that US recordings of a grating, supposedly unnatural sound match the chirping of the Jamaican field cricket, a notoriously noisy insect common in Cuba.

People's state of mind determined whether they developed symptoms, one diplomat asserted. "I don't know anybody who at one point thought we were under no risk and then subsequently decided that they were a victim." He himself heard a mysterious sound one night in June last year. "Standing in the atrium of my house, it was so loud and metallic, my brain literally hurt," he said. He called the embassy security officer, who came over and recorded the sound. However, his housekeeper knew it was a Jamaican field cricket. "Oh yeah, they drive people crazy," she said. Another diplomat said the sound "was eerie, a really nasty sound. Not like your head is going to explode, but it's very unpleasant." Then she and her family heard it on several more occasions outdoors, for example, while walking their dog. "That was reassuring. We realised it had to be the crickets." She acknowledged that over time, a divide widened between "the true believers" and those like her who are sceptical that there was an attack. *sciencemag.org, 20 June 2018.*

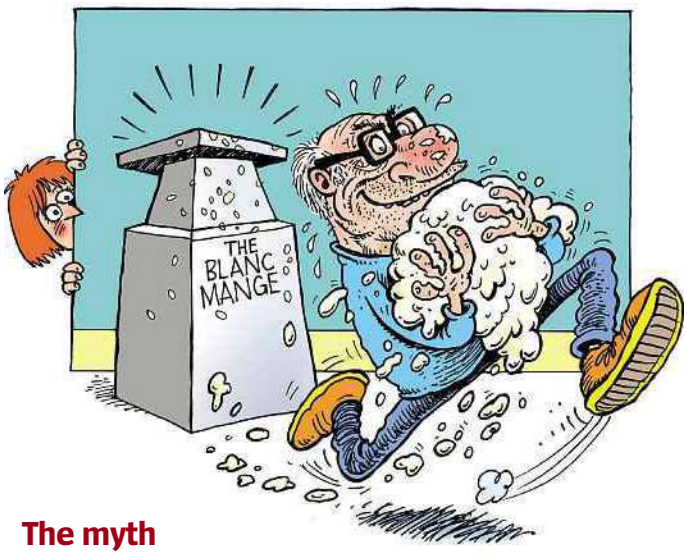
US NAVY PHOTO BY JOHN F WILLIAMS

ABOVE: US Navy acoustics expert Kurt Yankaskas, looking into the Cuban cases.

MYTHCONCEPTIONS

by Mat Coward

227: CIRCUMSTANCIAL EVIDENCE



HUNT EMERSON

The myth

Circumstantial evidence is weak and inferior, insufficient on its own to produce a safe conviction.

The "truth"

These are some examples of circumstantial evidence: DNA, fingerprints, bloodstains, and gunpowder residue. In English law (and in those countries influenced by English law) there are two kinds of evidence: direct and indirect (or "circumstantial"). Direct evidence proves a fact without any inference needing to be drawn by the court; circumstantial evidence points to a fact, but does not of itself prove it. The usual form of direct evidence is eyewitness testimony. Imagine a case in which a famous cartoonist is accused of stealing a blancmange. The court is shown evidence of his dabs on the blancmange plinth, of forensic traces of the blancmange about his whiskers and cravat, of his Facebook boast that he intended to steal the blancmange (and that the coppers would never take him alive), and that he had the motive and opportunity to do so. Finally, a witness is called to say she saw the cartoonist steal the blancmange. Only the latter is direct evidence; everything else is indirect. Since witnesses may sometimes lie, or be mistaken, it seems likely that jurors would often put more faith in forensic evidence (circumstantial) than in eyewitness testimony (direct). Indeed, in practice, in most criminal cases, the strongest evidence is "only circumstantial".

Sources

https://cncbooksblog.wordpress.com/2013/10/01/direct-or-indirect/; https://uk.practicallaw.thomsonreuters.com/1-586-8085?transitionType=Default&contextData=(sc.Default)&firstPage=true&comp=pluk&bhcp=1; www.peterharthan.com/Peter_Harthan/Legal_Blog/Entries/2013/3/15_Oscar_Pistorius.

Disclaimer

This column is produced in a lawyer-free environment. Tell us what we've got wrong, via the letters column, and send the bill to the editor.

Update

In **FT364:27** we reported there was "no evidence" that children are better at learning foreign languages than adults, and some evidence to the contrary. Now, a major new study at Massachusetts Institute of Technology (http://news.mit.edu/2018/cognitive-scientists-define-critical-period-learning-language-0501) has found that "it is nearly impossible for people to achieve proficiency similar to that of a native speaker unless they start learning a language by the age of 10."

VENERABLE CRITTERS

Jonathan the tortoise, Winnie the wombat, Rubble the cat and an assortment of other animal oldies

• Jonathan the St Helena tortoise is 186, the oldest verified land animal in the world. He was born in 1832 and given to the island's governor in 1882. Since cataracts made him blind, he has to be hand-fed as he can't reliably locate food. (An operation was deemed too risky.) He spent 26 years mating unsuccessfully with Frederica the tortoise, until the partner was found to be a Frederick. However, after reports last May claiming Jonathan was now celibate, his vet rushed to his defence. "He has a tremendous libido," said Joe Hollins, who looks after the animals on the island, a remote British territory in the South Atlantic. "He still enjoys the ladies, almost daily, particularly when the sun is out. The cataracts don't bother him, he knows his territory." Such is his vigour that when standing on the other side of the governor's mansion, where he lives, people can hear him in the throes of passion. Mr Hollins said that the sound was a "cross between a sigh and a hiss". *Sunday Express, 6 May; Times, 12 May; Sun, 13 May 2018.*

• The world's oldest known spider died in April at the age of 43, outliving its nearest rival by 15 years. Affectionately known as "Number 16", the female trapdoor spider (*Gaius villosus*) had been under observation in the Australian wild since its first moments in 1974. The arachnid is believed to have survived for so long by sticking to one protected burrow its entire life and expending the minimum amount of energy. Previously, the oldest known spider was a tarantula in Mexico, which died at the age of 28. The research is the life's work of Barbara York Main, now 88, who first set eyes on Number 16 shortly after its birth. "To our knowledge this is the oldest spider ever recorded and her significant life has allowed us to further investigate the trapdoor spider's behaviour," said Leanda Mason, a student of Professor Main's and the lead author of a study on Number 16. The trapdoor species is poisonous, but Ms Mason said of Number 16's passing: "We're really miserable about it. We were hoping she could have made it to 50 years old." *D.Telegraph, 28 April 2018.*

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP: Jonathan the St Helena tortoise, Winnie the wombat, Fatou the gorilla (with birthday cake) and the recently departed Puan, who at 62 was the world's oldest Sumatran orangutan.

• Winnie, Australia's oldest wombat – maybe the oldest in the world – turned 31 on 16 December 2017 at the National Zoo and Aquarium in Canberra, where the mature marsupial had lived for the previous 25 years. She was rescued from the wild, where wombats only live to an average age of 15. Her birthday treat was a special fruit and vegetable cake with chunks of carrot and lettuce. "She's a happy little wombat who loves her food and back scratches," said keeper Danielle Johinke. Patrick, the former oldest wombat, died at Ballarat Wildlife Park earlier in 2017, aged 31. *(Sydney) D.Telegraph, 16 Dec 2017.*

• One of the world's oldest silverback gorillas died at Longleat Safari Park in Wiltshire on 7 January 2018. He arrived at Longleat from Switzerland in the 1980s and was thought to be 56, but could have been older. He lived on his own island in the middle of a lake in a heated house, complete with classical pillars and a TV. The world's oldest male gorilla, Ozoum, was born in 1961 and lives in Atlanta, Georgia. *Metro, 10 Jan 2018.*

• Fatou the gorilla had her 61st birthday at Berlin Zoo last April, nearly six decades after she found her way to

GIANLUIGI GUERCIA / AFP / GETTY IMAGES

PERTH ZOO / ALEX ASBURY

NATIONAL ZOO AND AQUARIUM, CANBERRA

JOHN MACDOUGALL / AFP / GETTY IMAGES

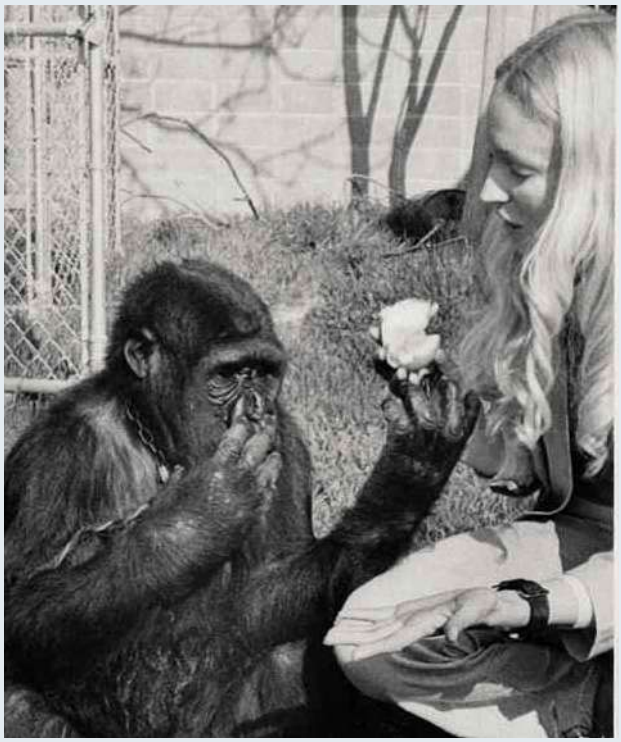
Germany, when a sailor used the young primate as payment at a bar in the French port city of Marseille. Officials said she shared the title of world's oldest female gorilla with Trudy in Little Rock Zoo, Arkansas. *<i> 14 April 2018.*

• The world's oldest Sumatran orangutan, who had 11 offspring and 54 descendants spread across the globe, died at Perth Zoo in Australia on 18 June 2018, aged 62. Puan (Indonesian for 'lady') had lived at the zoo since being donated by Malaysia in 1968. "Her genetics count for just under 10 per cent of the global [orangutan] zoological population," said Holly Thompson, the zoo's primate supervisor. *D.Telegraph, 20 June 2018.*

• A Maine Coon cat called Rubble, aged 30, is possibly the oldest living domestic cat. He was given to Michele Foster as a new-born kitten in May 1988. "He's a lovely cat, although he has got a little grumpy in his old age," said Ms Foster, 49. Vet Shaun Moore, who cares for Rubble in Exeter, Devon, said: "He's on medication for his blood pressure, but apart from that he is in remarkably good health." Siamese Scooter, 30, from Texas, was named a record breaker by the *Guinness Book of World Records* in 2016, but died before it was made official. The previous oldest cat in Britain was Nutmeg from Tyne and Wear, who died last year aged 32. The all-time record holder is Creme Puff from Austin, Texas, who died in 2005 aged 38 years and three days. *D.Star, Sun, 2 June 2018.*

• Polar bear Amderma, believed to be the oldest in the world, died in Perm Zoo, central Russia, in mid-February, aged 38. *D.Mirror, 17 Feb 2018.*

For FT's most recent round-up of animal Methuselahs, see ***FT345:26-27.***



BETTMANN / GETTY IMAGES

ABOVE: Koko with Dr Francine 'Penny' Patterson on the campus of Stanford University in the 1970s.

KOKO, RIP

Koko, a western lowland gorilla who is said to have been able to communicate by using more than 1,000 hand signs, died in her sleep on 19 June 2018, aged 46. Instructors taught her a version of American Sign Language and say she used it to convey thoughts and feelings. When she didn't know a word, she combined others to create new ones: a hairbrush was a "scratch comb"; a ring was a "finger bracelet". Ice cream was "my cold cup" and nectarine yogurt (her favourite) was "orange flower source".

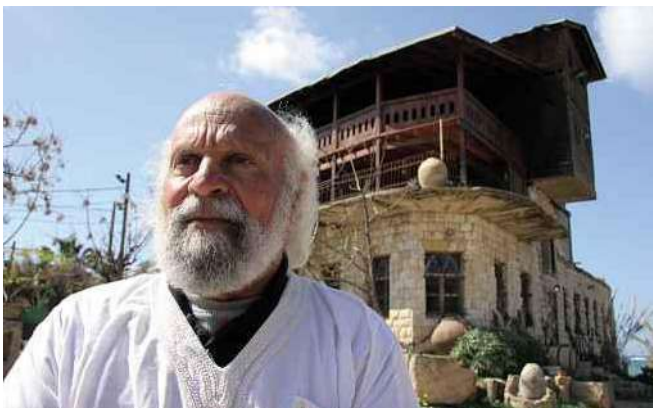
According to Prof Graham Turner of Heriot-Watt University, there's probably an element of wishful thinking here. He said: "Serious efforts to teach apes some signing began in the 1960s with researchers attempting to teach individual signs derived from American Sign Language (ASL). And the apes did learn to use some hand gestures in this way. But it is a distortion to imply that Koko or any ape has ever learned to use a natural signed language like a human being... These languages use the face, body and hands in an integrated way, exploiting their multidimensional, spatial medium through the layering of simultaneous and extremely precise visual elements. So communication in ASL or any such signed language entails acquiring command of a far more complex system of linguistic expression. That system must also permit the creation of new patterns and sequences – formed within the constraints of the system – for any context that may arise. With this kind of appreciation of sign language structure it is plain that 'signing' apes have never proven capable of displaying grammatical competence comparable to human fluency. Although the apes can use two or three signs in a sequence, close inspection of filmed data has repeatedly shown trainers prompting them, and then questionably interpreting separate responses as signed sentences." However, whether Koko used sign language or not, her command of gestures was extraordinary for a gorilla.

Koko was born Hanabi-ko (Japanese for "Fireworks Child") on 4 July 1971 at the San Francisco Zoo. Dr Francine "Penny" Patterson began working with Koko the next year. She and Dr Ronald Cohn moved Koko and the project to Stanford in 1974 and went on to establish The Gorilla Foundation. While at Stanford, the project expanded to include Michael, a second western lowland gorilla. In 1979 Koko and The Gorilla Foundation moved to the Santa Cruz Mountains where Ndume joined them as a fellow ambassador for their species. Once, listening to Dr Patterson and another zoologist debating whether to label Koko a 'juvenile' or an 'adolescent', Koko interrupted in sign language: "No, me gorilla!"

Koko featured in numerous documentaries and appeared on the cover of *National Geographic* twice. The first cover, in October 1978, featured a photograph she had taken of herself in a mirror. The second issue (January 1985) included the story of Koko and her kitten, All Ball. Following the article, the book *Koko's Kitten* was published and continues to be used in elementary schools worldwide. Koko was said to have an IQ of between 75 and 95, and could understand 2,000 words of spoken English. The average IQ for humans on many tests is 100, and most people score somewhere between 85 and 115. The Gorilla Foundation press release (20 June) said: "Koko touched the lives of millions as an ambassador for all gorillas and an icon for interspecies communication and empathy. She was beloved and will be deeply missed." *BBC News, 21+22 June; D.Mail, 22 June 2018.*

NECROLOG

A prolific fortean author goes to the great library in the sky and the laid back founder of one of the world's smallest micronations hands in his passport...



ISRAEL IMAGES / ALAMY STOCK PHOTO

ELI AVIVI

Eli Avivi was the self-proclaimed "President of the independent state of Akhzivland". Born in Persia, he came to British Mandate Palestine with his parents when he was two. He joined the clandestine Jewish navy, the Pal-Yam, aged 15, and fought first against the British Army and then Arab forces during the 1948 war. "Akhziv" was a Palestinian fishing village in the north of Israel near the border with Lebanon known as al-Zeeb, whose residents fled in 1948. Avivi came across the site four years later and lived among the dilapidated buildings, making a living selling fish to a nearby kibbutz. He habitually dressed in a long white kaftan and in later life sported a flowing white beard. He began a sideline as a photographer, specialising in semi-naked or naked girls, and was described as "Israel's number one nude photographer". Avivi was joined by Rina, whom he married. He started to let out lodgings – small wooden cabins which he built himself – and by the end of the 1950s Akhziv had become a popular hangout for the young and hip, where they bathed naked and smoked grass. Sophia Loren was a frequent visitor and Paul Newman stayed there while filming *Exodus* (1960).

The Avivis' troubles with the Israeli state began in the 1960s, when the government decided to turn the area into a national park and sent bulldozers to destroy the buildings. The situation escalated when the authorities erected a fence around the site, blocking the Avivis' access to the sea. In protest, Eli and his wife ripped up their passports and declared independence from Israel in 1971. They were arrested and charged with "creating a country without permission"; but there was no such offence on the Israeli statute book so the judge threw out the charges. The publicity propelled Akhzivland to international fame. Tourists flooded in and in 1972 Eli staged a rock festival, which caused 60-mile traffic jams. The country, unrecognised by any other state, had a population of two: Eli and Rina. The couple eventually reached an agreement with the Israeli authorities to pay for access to the sea, and created a "national" museum full of "antiquities" (flotsam and jetsam). They created their own passports and would stamp those of foreign visitors to their 1.4-hectare (3.5-acre) country. They issued stamps and designed a flag featuring a topless mermaid. The constitution read: "The president is democratically elected by his own vote." In the years that followed, travellers from across the world came to visit one of the world's smallest unrecognised states, drawn by its laid back philosophy. Eli Avivi is survived by Rina, 71.

Eli Avivi, micronation founder, born Kermanshah, Iran 1930; died (from pneumonia) Israel 16 May 2018, aged 88.

BRAD STEIGER

The prominent and prolific author Brad Steiger was born Eugene Olson on 19 February 1936. He spent his early years on a farm near Bode, Iowa, where at age 11 he underwent a life-altering experience occasioned by a serious farm accident, when at the edge of death he sensed the presence of the otherworldly. From then on, his life took a path destined to carry him far from his native Lutheranism and into the overlapping provinces of the paranormal, the occult, and the New Age. Most of the approximately 170 books he wrote or co-wrote addressed those subjects.

Steiger would claim to have created his first full-length writing exercise (i.e., a book in all but the published sense) at age seven. In his early adult life, he earned his undergraduate degree at Luther College, Decorah, Iowa, and then attended graduate school at the University of Iowa. He taught high-school English in Clinton, then creative writing back at Luther (1963-1967). By 1967, writing had become his full-time occupation, and he never looked back.

His first book was *Ghosts, Ghouls and Other Peculiar People* (1965), which set the template for much of his output over subsequent decades: punchily written, relatively brief accounts of weird encounters unburdened by deep analysis or discernible doubt. Basically, he liked to tell stories, and he did it well. He did write a few books which he considered among his more serious efforts, notably *Atlantis Rising* (1972), *Revelation: The Divine Fire* (1973), *Mysteries of Time and Space* (1974), and *Gods of Aquarius* (1976). Over time he attracted a considerable readership. His books are said to have sold something like 17 million copies.

He also wrote biographies of Judy Garland, Greta Garbo, and Rudolph Valentino. The last of these served as the basis for Ken Russell's 1977 film *Valentino*. With his third wife Sherry Hansen Steiger, whom he married in 1987 (the two remained together to the end), he put out books on everything from (of course) supernatural phenomena and alternative spirituality to health and healing, dogs and animal intelligence. Possessed of the sort of work ethic taught in Upper Midwestern households of his generation, he laboured on projects till he couldn't.

On the personal side, Steiger helped Loren Coleman and me to find a publisher for our first book, *The Unidentified* (Warner Books, 1975), which launched our careers, for good, ill, and all places between, as fortean authors. Brad and I stayed in sporadic touch over the years. I saw him in person all too rarely, but each time happily. Nobody who knew him, as far as I am aware, had a bad word to say about him. If he had his demons, he kept them well hidden. He was friendly, generous, kind-hearted, intelligent, and sincere. I always felt like a better human in his company.

He was not, as ignorant critics sometimes charged, a cynical exploiter of public credulity. He believed what he wrote, though he had stronger convictions about

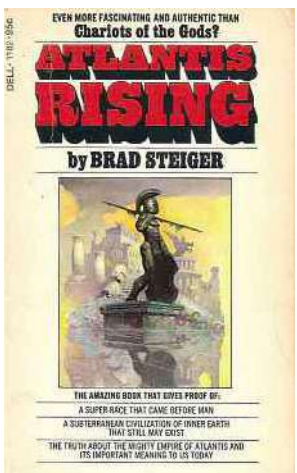
some things than others. At the same time his personality was so balanced that the options of fanaticism and zealotry likely never crossed his mind even passingly.

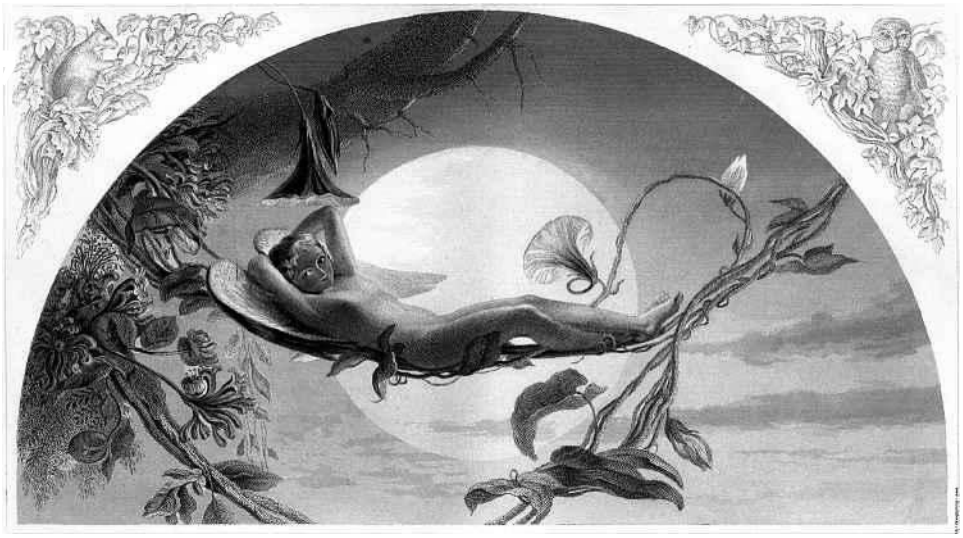
My own writing career and intellectual odyssey and Brad's had gone off in very different directions by the end of the 1970s. As was not the case with another prominent colleague from that period, however, Brad did not take it personally. When we'd meet, we didn't much discuss anomalies and their meaning. Mostly, we gossiped about mutual friends and acquaintances, and we chatted about the circumstances of our lives, which had led both of us to big cities (Phoenix, Arizona, in his case) and then, many years later, back to our small-town Midwestern roots. On that level, as kids and lapsed Lutherans from the remote provinces, he and I understood each other perfectly.

Like many evidence-driven anomalists who sought to attract educated readers and turn our interests into some form of quasi-respectable scholarship, I had stopped reading Brad's books by the early 1980s. I knew, though, that it didn't matter. What mattered was that my friend Brad Steiger was a uniquely good guy. I imagine that wherever he is now, he still is.

Brad Steiger, author, born Fort Dodge, Iowa, 19 Feb 1936; died in hospice care, Mason City, Iowa, 6 May 2018, aged 82.

Jerome Clark





FAIRIES, FOLKLORE AND FORTEANA

SIMON YOUNG FILES A NEW REPORT FROM THE INTERFACE OF STRANGE PHENOMENA AND FOLK BELIEF

FAIRY FRIENDS

For forteans, one of the most curious fields of psychological research is that concerning 'imaginary' or more politely 'invisible friends'. The point of interest here are the children who have a continuous relationship with entities that the rest of their family cannot see. Systematic research dates back to before World War II and, since then, hundreds of children have been interviewed about this or that non-material pal. The numbers are surprisingly high: by one (perhaps optimistic) estimate as many as 65 per cent of children have, at one time or another, an impossible chum.

I've become increasingly interested in this subject because of the number of fairy experiences that involve children having fairies as a *fixture* in their life (all the following examples are from the *Fairy Census 2014-2017*; see **FT321:25, 362:30-37**). The strange thing about having fairy friends is that the child usually has a relationship not with one fairy, but with a fairy collective: Michael J Hallowell in his fascinating fortean look at this question, *Invizikids*, noted a couple of cases like this (see **FT250:30-35**).

> THE STRANGE THING ABOUT FAIRY FRIENDS IS THAT THE CHILD OFTEN HAS A RELATIONSHIP NOT WITH ONE FAIRY, BUT WITH A FAIRY COLLECTIVE

But how do friendships with fairy groups work? Well, first, it is not always a 'friendship'. Sometimes the blighters are unpleasant: one case involved an old wooden storage chest from Liverpool infested by malevolent gnomes (§94). More typically, the fairy companions take on a semi-parental role: for instance, the 'guardian angels' who quaffed champagne in California (they didn't offer any to the child: §222); the Arkansas fairies who warned a little girl about snake-infested logs (§219); or the fairy in Nottinghamshire who introduced herself as a young girl's 'fairy mother' (§100).

Invisible friends usually, psychologists tell us, come to children who are lonely. Findings from the *Fairy Census* are often in line with this. One particularly moving testimony was written by a man who remembers how, aged seven, he shared his bedroom in Glasgow with his elder brother. The brother left home. "I went to sleep as normal, but woke after a time to find a group of the little people dancing around on the floor at the head of my bed… This went on for some months on a more or less nightly basis, but gradually the interval between appearances became longer and longer until it stopped altogether" (§167). The most fascinating invisible friends were partnered with a young girl who, up until her 10th birthday, went for glides above her American home with "fluid like beings". They were "dressed in material that barely covered [them] and was white and thin and always flowing as they too never touched the ground". She summoned them with a secret signal and described these night-time trips above the roof tops as a "treat".

Alternative histories

PETER BROOKESMITH surveys the latest fads and flaps from the world of ufological research

DON'T MENTION THE WAR!

Since approximately forever, there's been a ufological legend that the Nazis built and flew a flying saucer (see **FT175:42-47**). A bit late in the day, and not long ago, German model makers Revell obliged with a build-it-yourself kit purporting to represent this machine, named the *Haunebu II*. Its marketing blurb described it as "the first object in the world capable of flying in space" and that it could fly "up to speeds of 6,000 km/h" but said it wasn't produced after its test phase in 1943. The kit's package shows the beast – looking remarkably as if it had been designed by George Adamski – whizzing aloft with a quartet of Convair B-36D bombers, one of which it has just comprehensively whopped. The first B-36 rolled off the line on 20 August 1945 and flew for the first time on 8 August 1946. The renowned German efficiency apparently doesn't extend as far as decent history lessons. This was the objection of the German Children's Protection Association, and the Military History Museum in Dresden. That latter complained first that the *Haunebu II* was "technologically impossible", and since Revell had failed to say it had never existed, "people who buy it might actually believe the Nazis possessed superior technologies". Neither the spokesman nor the company explained the time-travelling B-36Ds, which entered service in August 1951. But hey! Who knows what those boys in Hangar 18 managed to back-engineer in the four years after Roswell? Such are the intricacies of ufology. Anyway, Revell withdrew the product in June, with ritual apologies of course.

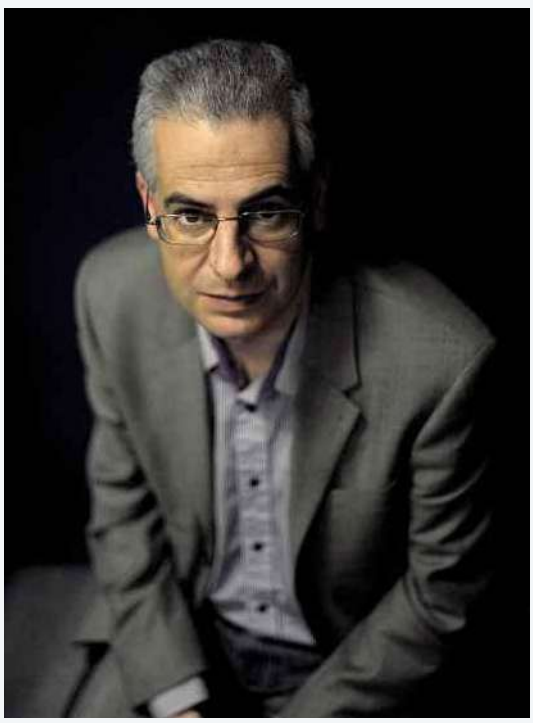
REVELL

LEFT: The offending Nazi saucer, since withdrawn. **BELOW**: Nick Pope; does he know any more about UFOs than the rest of us?

UFO DESK JOCKEY RETURNS

And speaking of the past… Nearly a quarter of a century after leaving the MoD's (now deceased) UFO desk, Nick Pope is still spinning imaginative accounts of it. In an article in that unimpeachable journal of record, the *Sun* (13 July 2018), he says his "job throughout the Nineties was to investigate" UFOs. If one and a half days' work a week from 1991 to 1994 – for such was the burden of the "head of the MoD's UFO Project" – is "throughout the Nineties", we have all been seriously mistaught arithmetic. Mr Pope then goes on to tell us that he "came out of retirement to help with the MoD's release project – the decade-long declassification of top-secret papers – which concluded in January."

Well, the papers weren't all that secret, and Pope didn't help with the release project. Or not much. He was wheeled out to present the release of the first batch in 2008, after which Dr David Clarke, one of my distinguished predecessors in this space, took over the task of curation and presentation. And unlike Pope, he had been instrumental, well before the FOIA and the MoD's programme, in getting hundreds of pages of UFO-related material into the public domain. He, also unlike Mr Pope, has a dauntingly accurate memory. Scuttlebutt (for the record, my source is not Dr Clarke) says that the MoD and National Archives were so underwhelmed with Pope's performance in 2008 that they vowed to keep him at arm's length or further for the rest of the release programme. What Pope *actually* did as each fresh tranche was released, was write an article for one tabloid rag or another afterward, making various untenable claims about UFOs, but mostly promoting himself and his 'expertise', more and more ancient as it was getting by the day.



That expertise was never up to much anyway, one might argue. His first book, *Open Skies, Closed Minds*, contained nothing that any 'researcher' couldn't have hoovered up from a cursory reading of the believers' literature or the Internet. One is not alone in these doubts. From the released MoD files (DEFE 24/2092): "[Mr Pope's] knowledge of this issue, other than from publicly available sources, must be regarded as dated. Mr Pope elected to describe himself as the 'Head of the MoD's UFO Project', a term entirely of his own invention, and he… [has developed] a parallel career as a pundit on the topic, including writing several books, some purportedly non-fiction. Mr Pope constantly puts himself forward in various parts of the media, solicited and unsolicited, as an 'expert'… and seeks credit amongst other aficionados for having 'forced' the MoD to reveal its 'secret' files on the subject. The latter is far from the truth, as we had begun publishing details of the most 'popular' reports in the Publication scheme, prior to the advent of the Freedom of Information Act." And here one hears the heavy sigh of someone just trying to do his job: "Mr Pope's activities have nevertheless resulted in the generation of considerable workload for the staff currently employed in responding to queries on this topic."

In light of this, Pope's further ramblings in his *Sun* article need little attention. Although it's worth remarking that he opens with the idea that the British MoD was afraid the Russians and the Chinese might be engineering death rays and heaven knows what weaponry from whatever they discovered about UFOs, then dismisses this as a conspiracy theory. The man needs to make his mind up. But as someone said in a recent post on UFO UpDates, he doesn't really know any more about UFOs than the rest of us. For that statement of the blazingly obvious, Pope blocked the commenter.

ETIENNE GILFILLAN

The Knight at Sky

JENNY RANDLES recalls the time she tangled on air with the legendary UFO sceptic Sir Patrick Moore

Like many readers of this magazine, I sometimes frequent the FT online forums and it was a chat on here that inspired this month's column. I remembered a TV debate show in which I took part about 30 years ago where I battled with noted astronomer and TV presenter, Sir Patrick Moore.

We had crossed swords a few times when I had a radio series for the BBC and I was trying to persuade him to comment on a UFO case he knew a bit about. But Patrick was rather sensitive on that topic. His 'interest' in the subject was long known to me – as was his intense scepticism. Indeed, he once told me that his first TV appearance in 1956 involved 'Flying Saucers', and he remained fascinated by them. That first appearance saw him tussle onscreen with Air Chief Marshal Lord Dowding. The Battle of Britain war hero believed in flying saucers whilst Moore did not. Sadly lost to posterity, it must have been a great bit of television.

Patrick knew that no aliens were coming from our Solar System and was an early proponent of the null hypothesis: that all UFOs become IFOs with enough investigation. He regarded them as amusing in a scientific sense and was not averse to using them humorously in public: check out his hilarious deadpan interview on YouTube with a man who speaks and writes Venusian in 1969.

Nonetheless, Moore's no-nonsense style had caught the eye of the fledgling TV producers of the 1950s BBC, and his quirky manner was just what they needed in the days of tiny black and white screens. A colourful, larger than life presenter proved a simple way to counteract such technical limitations. Hence *The Sky at Night* arrived just as we launched our first objects into orbit and the Space Race thrilled a generation. Patrick's TV career bloomed after that, and he ended up appearing in other guises, from Morecambe and Wise comedy shows to playing classical music; his choice of Sibelius for the theme of his TV series was inspired, and the opening bars remain inextricably linked with it. He was knighted for his services to science broadcasting – notably his unbroken presentation run (save one episode when he had food poisoning) of *The Sky at Night*, which he presented from 1957 until his death 55 years later.

The particular debate in which we faced off in the 1980s was an early broadcast by the forerunner of Sky TV. Moore had a series of rational arguments lined up to counter the idea that aliens in spaceships were visiting Earth and anecdotes about hoaxes that, if

KEYSTONE / HULTON ARCHIVE / GETTY IMAGES

you choose to believe some evidence, he even helped to fabricate, either for fun or to show how easily people could be fooled. Notably there is the 1954 Cedric Allingham contact case near Lossiemouth, the book about which some believe was ghost written by Moore and a colleague (the claim was made by Steuart Campbell and Chris Allen in *Magonia* magazine in 1986). *Flying Saucer from Mars* told the story of the alien contact experienced by its author, Cedric Allingham, who was said to have 'taken ill' and 'died' straight after publication. Moore possibly had good reason to cover up his association with a hoax, if such it was, and he always denied his authorship (see **FT172:22**, **298:26** and, for another Moore hoax, **FT352:31**).

Nonetheless, he told me that he *had* created a hoax in the 1950s "when flying saucers were new". This was not the Allingham affair, but it was still revealing. Sir Patrick had invented a UFO sighting, sent it to his local newspaper in Sussex and watched delightedly as lots of other locals claimed to have seen something like what he had made up. This influenced his view on UFOs.

Much of what Moore would say in debates on the subject was sensible. He felt most UFO sightings are explained, so why not all of them? Aliens coming here was unlikely; far more unlikely than unresolved cases being eventually solved in ways we had not yet figured out. If you went into a TV debate with him unaware of that position, citing a case you thought was strong, he would counter quickly and lure you further into hyperbole and increasingly unlikely theories. The last thing he expected was for you to undercut his argument by making it first: so that is what I chose to do on the programme, telling viewers that most UFOs were explained, that we had to view the rest as being solvable and should avoid extraordinary theories of origin, which might never be needed. In the meantime, I noted, UFOs were just that: unidentified, *not* unidentifiable.

This was my stance – one readers of this column will be familiar with – but it came as a surprise to Sir Patrick. Like most people, he expected UFO investigators to be fervent believers in little green men. Of course, he fought back, trying to get me to say something silly by asking where I thought aliens came from; I suggested Earth via the human mind would be the first place to look.

Afterwards, I was told by a floor manager that he was surprised to see the astronomer struggle to find counter-arguments, and I felt a little mean because one of the TV host's friends had primed me about what to do. That was comedian and ex-*Goon Show* star Michael Bentine, an erudite thinker on the paranormal whom I had met several times. Bentine had been invited by Moore to join him on *The Sky at Night* in 1979 for a programme about UFOs. It's telling that he chose a well-known and eccentric comedian for a foil. This was Moore taking UFOs 'seriously' for a science show. He was, as ever, directing the audience. He stated at the start of the programme that he was "the most complete sceptic… I don't believe a word of it". Bentine was more circumspect, calling himself a "hopeful agnostic" who believed about "two per cent" of sightings were unexplained. So I was well prepared for my own confrontation with Sir Patrick.

I did try to make amends by inviting him onto a BBC radio documentary I was making about UFOs. He was keen at first, but then I made a mistake and mentioned the Allingham story. Patrick was apoplectic. I could hear him spluttering down the phone. I said that I was not accusing him of anything, nor would I ask him about it on air – but it didn't matter. There were references to legal action if anyone reported the story of his alleged role in the Allingham book; so, I let it rest. After that, he terminated our conversation and said he wouldn't be on my show under any circumstances and wanted no association with the "absolute nonsense" that "flying saucers" (as he still called them quaintly) represented. Campbell and Allen were never sued despite publishing their claims. Nor was a national newspaper that carried a report. Moore himself chose to leave the claims unchallenged up to his death in 2012. Nevertheless, I was grateful to the knight when at Sky for showing me the way to conduct TV debates about UFOs: be restrained, state only what you can support with evidence and never overreach by claiming something that is speculative and has no objective confirmation. In UFO research, less really is Moore.

Edinburgh's Mysterious Miniature Coffins

In 1836, a group of young boys discovered a strange cache of "Lilliputian coffins" hidden on a hillside above Edinburgh. **MIKE DASH** asks who put them there – and why?

It may have been Charles Fort, in one of his more memorable passages, who described the strange discovery best:

London Times, July 20, 1836:

That, early in July, 1836, some boys were searching for rabbits' burrows in the rocky formation, near Edinburgh, known as Arthur's Seat. In the side of a cliff, they came upon some thin sheets of slate, which they pulled out.

Little cave.

Seventeen tiny coffins.

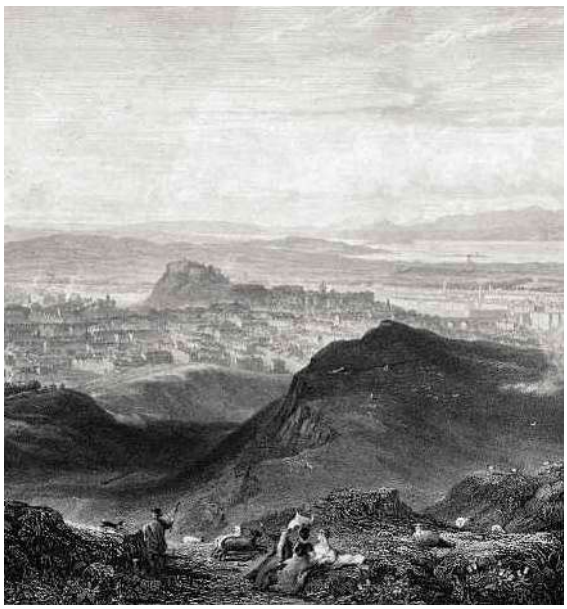
Three or four inches long.

In the coffins were miniature wooden figures. They were dressed differently both in style and material. There were two tiers of eight coffins each, and a third one begun, with one coffin.

The extraordinary datum, which has especially made mystery here:

That the coffins had been deposited singly, in the little cave, and at intervals of many years. In the first tier, the coffins were quite decayed, and the wrappings had moldered away. In the second tier, the effects of age had not advanced so far. And the top coffin was quite recent-looking. [1]

Fort's short account is accurate, so far as it goes – and for more than a century not much more was known about the origin or purpose of the strange miniature coffins. Fewer than half of them survived; the *Scotsman*, in the first known published account, explained that "a number were destroyed by the boys pelting them at each other as unmeaning and contemptible trifles." Those that were brought down from the hillside eventually found their way into the collection of Robert Frazier, a South Andrews Street jeweller, who put them on display in his private museum. [2] When, after Frazier's retirement in 1845, the collection was auctioned off, this lot, described in the sale catalogue as "the celebrated Lilliputian coffins found on Arthur's Seat, 1836", sold for just over £4. The coffins thus passed into unknown private hands, and remained there until 1901, when a set of eight, together with their contents, were donated to the National Museum of Scotland by their then-owner, Christina Couper of Dumfriesshire.



LEFT: Edinburgh seen from Arthur's Seat, in an engraving of 1846. **FACING PAGE:** Some of the "celebrated Lilliputian coffins".

"Little cave. Seventeen tiny coffins. Three or four inches long"

Circumstantial evidence strongly suggests that these coffins were the same group as the one Frazier obtained in 1836, but few other details are available. The first newspaper reports appeared some three weeks after the initial discovery, and none named any of the boys. One much later account, which is unreferenced and which appeared in the *Edinburgh Evening News* as late as 1956 –but which is so detailed that it may have been based on some otherwise unknown contemporary source –adds that the find was made on 25 June 1836, and notes that the niche, which was "about a foot in height and about 18 inches wide", was opened up with trowels: tools it seems reasonable to suppose a group of boys out rabbiting might have had about their persons.

Another intriguing detail in the same account states that the surviving coffins were retrieved the "next day" by the boys' schoolmaster, one Mr Ferguson, who was a member of a local archæological society. The coffins were still unopened at this point, the reporter Robert Chapman added, but "Mr Ferguson took them home in a bag and that evening he settled down in his kitchen and began to prise the lids up with a knife… Mr Ferguson took them to the next meeting of his society and his colleagues were equally amazed." Where Chapman got this information remains unknown, but a search of the contemporary street directories shows that two schoolmasters named Ferguson were working in Edinburgh in 1836 – George Ferguson as a classics master at Edinburgh Academy, and Findlay Ferguson as a teacher of English and maths at Easter Duddingston.

WHERE WERE THEY FOUND?

The Chapman account at least explains how the surviving coffins found their way from the boy discoverers into the hands of the city's learned gentlemen. In these murky circumstances, it is unsurprising that the precise spot where the find was made is only vaguely known. The *Scotsman* reported that the boys who unearthed the coffins had been "searching for rabbit burrows on the north-east range of Arthur's seat" when one spotted "a small opening in the rocks, the peculiar appearance of which attracted their attention."

Another account, which appears to have circulated orally in Edinburgh at this time, and which was put in writing by a correspondent to *Notes & Queries* under the headline "A Fairy's Burial Place", puts it a good deal more dramatically:

COURTESY NATIONAL MUSEUMS SCOTLAND

PHILLIP HARRINGTON / ALAMY STOCK PHOTO

ABOVE: Arthur's Seat, Edinburgh, where the coffins were discovered in July 1836 by a group of boys looking for rabbit burrows; the precise spot of the discovery is not known. **BELOW:** Salisbury Crags, which according to a writer to *Notes & Queries* in 1863 was the true site of the find, although this seems unlikely.

While I was a resident at Edinburgh, either in the year 1836 or 1837, I forget which, a curious discovery took place, which formed the subject of a nine days' wonder, and a few newspaper paragraphs. Some children were at play at the foot of Salisbury Craigs, when one of them, more venturesome than the others, attempted to ascend the escarpment of the cliff. His foot slipped, and to save himself from a dangerous fall, he caught at a projecting piece of rock, which appeared to be attached to the other portions of the cliff. It gave way, however, beneath the pressure of his hand, and although it broke his fall, both he and it came to the bottom of the craig. Nothing daunted, the hardy boy got up, shook himself, and began the attempt a second time. When he reached the point from whence the treacherous rock had projected, he found that it had merely masked the entrance to a large hole, which had been dug into the face of the cliff. [3]

The *Scotsman*'s account is, I think, to be preferred here – *Notes & Queries* adds various other details which are known to be untrue, such as the statement that the coffins had "little handles, and all the other embellishments which the undertakers consider necessary to respectability" – but it is actually broadly in line with *N&Q*'s with regard to location. Conversely, another Edinburgh paper, the *Caledonian Mercury* (5 Aug 1836), describes the spot as lying "at the back of Arthur's Seat" – that is, on the south side of the hill. Given the relative accessibility of the northern face, and the length of time that appears to have separated

Each Lilliputian coffin "contained a miniature figure of the human form"

the burials from their discovery, it is perhaps marginally more likely that the exact site of the find was neither Salisbury Crags nor the north range of Arthur's Seat, but a spot to the south, in a relatively remote location on the far side of the Seat from Edinburgh itself. This ties in rather intriguingly with the notion that Findlay Ferguson of Easter Duddingston may have been the schoolmaster associated with the find, since Duddingston lies directly beneath the southern face of Arthur's Seat. Whatever the facts, it seems clear from the contemporary sources that the coffins were found not in a substantial "cave" on the hillside, as is sometimes supposed, but in a small gap in the rocks. The *Scotsman*, again, has the clearest description: "The mouth of this little cave was closed by three thin pieces of slate-stone, rudely cut at the upper ends into a conical form, and so placed as to protect the interior from the effects of the weather".

According to one later account, in a record in the so-called "Continuation Catalogue" of the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland,[4] at least one of these slates was "rudely shaped like the headstone of a grave". As for what the boys found when the slates had been removed, it was "an aperture about 12 inches square in which were lodged 17 Lilliputian coffins, forming two tiers of eight each, and one on a third, just begun!" Each of the coffins, the *Scotsman* added, "contained a miniature figure of the human form cut out in wood, the faces in particular being pretty well executed. They were dressed from head to foot in cotton clothes, and decently laid out with a mimic representation of all the funereal trappings which usually form the last habiliments of the dead. The coffins are about three or four inches in length, regularly shaped, and cut out from a single piece of wood, with the exception of the lids, which are nailed down with wire sprigs or common brass pins. The lid and sides of each are profusely studded with ornaments, formed with small pieces of tin, and inserted in the wood with great care and regularity."

WHAT WERE THEY?

So much for the circumstances of the discovery. The greater mystery, as the *Scotsman* was swift to point out, was what exactly the coffins were, who had placed them in their hiding place, and when. Several potential explanations were advanced, the most popular being that the burials were part of some spellwork, or that they represented mimic burials, perhaps for sailors lost at sea. Most of these solutions, however, assumed that the newspapers of the day were correct to state that the burials had been made over a considerable period of time. According to the *Edinburgh Evening Post* (20 Aug 1836), for instance, "in the under row the shrouds were considerably decayed and the wood rotten, while the last bore evident marks of being a very recent deposit."

This assumption is, however, hard to prove. The discovery was made not by some trained archæologist, who made a painstaking examination before moving a single piece of wood, but by a group of boys who appear to have thoroughly mixed up the coffins by hurling them at each other, and who never gave any first-person account of their find. The best that can be said is that several of the surviving coffins display considerably more decay than the others – the most obvious sign being the rotten state (or complete absence) of the figurines' grave clothes – but whether the decay was the product of time or simply weathering is not now possible to say. It may be that the decayed coffins were simply those that occupied the lower tier in the burial nook, and so were most exposed to water damage. If that's the case, there is no need to assume that the burials stretched over many years.

This is important, because the only comprehensive study yet made of the "fairy coffins" strongly indicates that all postdate 1800, and that the odds favour a deposit or deposits made after about 1830 – within about five years, in other words, of the discovery of the cache. The work in question was carried out by Allen Simpson, a former president of the Royal Scottish Society of Arts and currently a member of the faculty of History and Classics at Edinburgh University, and Samuel Menefee, senior associate of the Center for National Security Law at the University of Virginia, and it was published, regrettably obscurely, in the journal of the city's local history society, *The Book of the Old Edinburgh Club*.[5]

Simpson and Menefee began their work by describing the eight surviving artefacts (which can still be seen today, on display in the National Museum of Scotland). Two, they note, were originally painted pink or red; the interior of one is lined with paper, made with rag fibre and datable to the period after 1780. As for the details of the construction:

Each coffin contains an 'occupant' and has been hollowed from a solid piece of wood. Each also has a lid which has been held in place by pins of various sizes, driven down through the sides and ends of the coffin base. In many instances the pin shafts are still in place, though some are bent over; when the lids were prised off the coffins most of the hand-wound pin heads became detached… Although the type of wood has not previously been commented on, it has now been identified as Scots pine. Coffin dimensions vary… those now accessible for study are 3.7 to 4.1 inches long [94-104mm], 0.7 to 1.2 inches wide [18-30mm], and 0.8 to 1.0 inches deep [20-25mm] with their lids in place…

Judging by the longitudinal scoring on the base of the recess, a sharp knife –probably a hooked knife –has been used. The fact that the surfaces at the ends of the recess are so cleanly cut indicates that the knife has been very sharp; but the user has apparently not been a woodworker by trade because he has not had access to an edged tool such as a chisel to cut out the base of the recess, and has had difficulty in controlling the depth of the cuts (which have even penetrated the base of coffin No 5).

There are two types of external shape. Five of the coffins (Nos 1, 2, 4, 6 and 8) have been carved with square-cut corners and edges, although most have slightly bowed sides so that the coffin has a taper at each end. However, the remaining three (Nos 3, 5 and 7) have a pronounced rounding of the edges and ends of the coffin; this suggests a different manual approach… and may indicate that the coffins could have been carved by two different individuals.

WHO MADE THEM?

As to who did the carving, Simpson and Menefee point out that "the most striking visual feature of the coffins is the use of applied pieces of tinned iron as decoration". Analysis of this metal suggests that it is very similar to the sort of tin used in contemporary shoe buckles, and this in turn opens up the possibility that the coffins were the work of shoemakers or leatherworkers, who would have had the manual skills to make the coffins but would have lacked the specialist carpentry tools needed to make a neater job of it.

COURTESY NATIONAL MUSEUMS SCOTLAND

ABOVE: Eight of the 17 coffins; each was carved from a single piece of Scots pine and contained an occupant dressed "from head to foot in cotton clothes".

NOT DEAD YET: A 'RADICAL' NEW THEORY OF THE EDINBURGH COFFINS

Most theories concerning the Edinburgh coffins assume that they commemorate the dead – but what if these artefacts were made to represent the living? JEFF NISBET finds suggestive links between the Radicals of the 1820s, the Scottish gypsies and the funerary rites of Ancient Egypt.

Scotland's 1820 Radical War was a week-long populist uprising rooted in the earlier American and French Revolutions, culminating during the economic downturn following the Napoleonic Wars. Punctuated by labour strikes and armed engagements between marchers and government forces, the insurrection ended with the execution of three men and the transportation of 19 others to Australia. It is now known, however, that the government had precipitated the insurrection using spies and *agents provocateurs.* As a result, the Radical leaders were quickly identified and punished, and a new sense of Scottish national identity was soon orchestrated by literary lion Sir Walter Scott on the occasion of King George IV's 1822 visit to Edinburgh. By the time the coffins were discovered, the rebellion had been largely forgotten, save perhaps by those whose loved ones had been lost to either the hangman's noose or a ship bound for Australia.

It's my theory that the artefacts' *raison d'être* was to honour the Radicals; their "resurrection" in 1836 was perhaps an attempt to keep the flame of rebellion lit in a land now happy to forget – an attempt that ultimately failed.

To see how this theory might fit better with what has since been proposed, let's consider that …

- **Their eyes are open:** While Menefee and Simpson report this suggests the figurines were possibly repurposed from a set of wooden soldiers, it is plausible this was meant to signify they represented persons who were *not yet dead.*
- **They are clothed:** The workers most associated with the uprising were weavers. Could it be that the clothing symbolised the products of their craft? The three executed leaders were weavers, as were nine of the transportees.
- **They are dressed as men:** Since the most damning argument against the Burke and Hare theory is that some of their victims were women, I suggest the clothing symbolised that *all* of the transportees were male.

ROB KOOPMAN / CREATIVE COMMONS

Let's now consider where they were found. Bearing in mind that our rabbit-hunting schoolboys were never interviewed, the Arthur's Seat locations remain in doubt. According to Mike Dash, however, there was an additional report published in *Notes & Queries* telling a tale circulated only orally at the time: that the discovery was made by one schoolboy's attempt to climb the sheer face of Salisbury Crags.

Shortly following the uprising, Sir Walter Scott proposed that unemployed weavers be kept busy building a footpath around the Crags, since known as 'The Radical Road'. From here, visitors can still look out upon all of Edinburgh and the ocean that connects us all – even those banished to far-flung places. What finer spot to hide a tribute to the transportees than along a road planned by a Scottish nobleman, but built by Radicals?

Now, let's consider the profession of the person or persons who might have fashioned these artefacts. According to Simpson and Menefee, the coffins' tin decorations suggest they might have been made by a shoemaker. But more must be considered if their creation was a political act. In James Halliday's *Scotland: A Concise History*, the author lists the trades most likely to be radicalised: "Smiths and tailors, weavers and cobblers, were to some extent able to determine their own working hours, and could award themselves some time for study and discussion. Members of these crafts were famous for generations for their interest in Radical politics, and around anvil and bench, loom and last, many an impromptu debating society flourished; discussing public events, recent publications and their own social condition. By the 1790s they could have been discussing the triumph of democracy in America and the principles of Liberty, Equality and Fraternity extended to all men by the French revolutionaries after 1789."

LEFT: An ancient Egyptian Ushabti in its carved wooden coffin.

The Radicals who marched in 1820 were not all weavers. Of the 19 transportees, just nine weavers are listed, and seven others are listed as a tailor, a cobbler, two blacksmiths, two nailers, and a carpenter – all skills found in the carving and decoration of the coffins and the clothing of the figurines. While weaving, woodwork and metalwork can all be seen in the crafting of the artefacts, it is difficult to believe that so many skilled hands took part in their creation. There is, however, one group with proficiency in all those crafts – the Scottish Gypsies.

The 1822 Turnpike Act, signed into law just two years after the uprising, legislated that Gypsies should be fined for roadside camping, a liberty the group had long taken. Thirteen years later, just one year before the discovery of the Arthur's Seat coffins, that law was further strengthened, and the freedom of the Gypsies further constrained. Although the group has a history of Scottish residence since the 16th century, they have not had an easy time. In the 18th century, British merchants applied for Gypsy transportation, and 10 are recorded as being shipped to Virginia in 1715; it's easy to imagine they felt an ideological kinship with the Radicals.

The Gypsies were skilled, moreover, in crafts that afforded them an itinerant living, regardless of the law, repairing pots and pans or making clothes pegs for sale. In fact, if we consider how similar certain pegs look to the carved bodies inside the Arthur's Seat coffins, it's easy to see how Gypsy hands could have fashioned the artefacts. Even the style of curved knife Simpson and Menefee suggest as the possible carving tool can

be recognised in the Gypsy peg knives, so named because they were used to carve clothes pegs.

One of the names given to the Gypsies in early Scottish records is "Egyptians," perhaps due to the belief that Egypt was their country of origin – a belief that the Gypsies are known to have encouraged. While recent genetic studies have shown that the Gypsy blood group left India some 1,500 years ago, there is the possibility that some of them made their way to the UK *through* Egypt. There are, in fact, many examples of a common Egyptian antiquity that looks very much like those found in Holyrood Park: the funerary figures known as Ushabti. Placed in ancient Egyptian tombs as symbolic servants to the dead, these small wooden figures have been found lying in carved wooden coffins. It's interesting that modern Egyptology is considered to have begun in 1822, just two years after the Radical War of 1820.

Those who lean toward a conspiratorial view of history may appreciate that the uprising was an event the social elites and the government would have wished to bury rapidly. Berresford Ellis and Seamas Mac a'Ghobhainn, in *The Radical Rising*, report that the memory of the insurrection quickly "began to grow dim, and the folk memory of it was soon lost. References to it in records became obscure and soon no mention of it at all was made in history books."

It seems, though, that the memory of the insurrection did not just fade naturally with the passage of time, but was helped on its way to historical obscurity. In his preface to the 1989 edition of the book, Ellis has this to say: "One of the reasons that we felt obvious efforts had been made to 'edit' the events from Scottish history was the fact that the rising contained a national context, for it was the intention of the Radicals to establish an independent Scottish Parliament – an objective that was unacceptable to the Establishment and its historians."

If my theory about the original purpose of the Arthur's Seat Coffins is correct, then the Radicals of 1820 are not dead yet, and may finally have a chance to proclaim what they have long been denied — a chorus of tiny voices shouting "Yes!" at last.

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COURTESY NATIONAL MUSEUMS SCOTLAND

ABOVE: The open eyes of the figures, it has been argued, show that they do not represent corpses, while their "rigidly erect bearing" is suggestive of toy soldiers – but why were they placed in coffins and buried?

The figurines found within the coffins were also studied. Each of the eight is neatly carved from close-grained white wood, and they share almost identical proportions, varying in height by no more than 5mm (about a fifth of an inch). Some have arms, but several dolls have had them removed, apparently to allow the figure to fit neatly into its coffin. This suggests that the figures were not carved specifically for the purpose of burial, but have been adapted from an existing set; Simpson and Menefee – noting their "rigidly erect bearing", indications that they originally wore hats, and their carefully carved lower bodies "formed to indicate tight knee breeches and hose, below which the feet are blackened to indicate ankle boots" – believe they are the remnants of a group of toy soldiers, and note that each is made to stand upright with the addition of a slight weight on its front, which might have been supplied by the addition of a model musket. (There would have been no need to ensure carvings intended simply as corpses would stand upright.) The features are very similar, and "it seems unlikely that the figures were ever intended to represent particular individuals". Moreover, "the open eyes of the figures suggest that they were not carved to represent corpses".

Based on their appearance, the authors tentatively date the group to the 1790s; no dendrochronological analysis or carbon dating, however, has been done on the collection. Several of the surviving figurines are still clad in well-preserved "grave clothes". As Simpson and Menefee point out, "single-piece suits, made from fragments of cloth, have been moulded round the figures and sewn in place. With some figures there is evidence of adhesive under the cloth. The style of dress does not relate to period grave clothes, and if it is intended to be representational at all then it is more in keeping with everyday wear… The fact that the arms of figure No 8 were already missing when the figure was clothed suggests that the fabric was merely intended to cover the figures decently and not to represent garments." All the fabrics are cheap, made of plain woven cotton, though one of the figures is clad in checks and three "seem to have commercially inked patterns applied to the cloth".

The evidence of the figurines makes dating the burials much easier. According to Naomi Tarrant, curator of European textiles at the National Museum of Scotland, the good condition of the surviving vestments suggests they were buried in the 1830s. More revealingly, one of the figures has been sewn into its grave clothes with a three-ply thread. Cotton thread replaced linen in Scotland from about 1800; "almost certainly," Simpson and Menefee assert, "such thread would have been manufactured in the thread mills of Paisley, where tradition has it that cotton thread was not made before 1812." Three-ply thread, according to Philip Sykas of Manchester Art Galleries, the leading expert on that topic, came into use in about 1830. Sykas believes that the mixture of one-, two- and three-ply threads found on the Arthur's Seat figures "indicates a date in the 1830s".

Now, none of this proves all the burials took place at so late a date as 1830; it is possible that the decayed surviving figurines represent interments that took place earlier than this, and also that the figurines sewn

HULTON ARCHIVE / GETTY IMAGES

ABOVE LEFT: The execution of bodysnatcher William Burke on 28 January 1829. **ABOVE RIGHT:** Burke's partner in crime, William Hare. The theory that the 17 Edinburgh coffins commemorate the resurrection men's victims suffers from the flaw that 12 of these were female and the miniature figures are all male.

with one- or two-ply thread predate 1830. Nonetheless, it does seem possible to suggest that all the burials took place, at the outside, between about 1800 and 1830, and it is entirely likely that Simpson and Menefee are correct to state that all took place during the 1830s. This in turn suggests it is possible that all 17 figurines were interred at the same time, and the fact that the coffins seem to have been carved by at most two people and that the figurines apparently originally formed part of a single set implies that the burial(s) were carried out by the same person, or small group of people "over a comparatively short period".

If this is true, write Simpson and Menefee, "the significant feature of the burial is that there were 17 coffins," and "it is arguable that the problem with the various theories is their concentration on motivation, rather than on the event or events that caused the interments. The former will always be open to argument, but if the burials were event-driven – by, say the loss of a ship with 17 fatalities during the period in question – the speculation would at least be built on demonstrable fact.

Stated another way, what we seek is an Edinburgh-related event or events, involving 17 deaths, which occurred close to 1830 and certainly before 1836. One obvious answer springs to mind – the West Port Murders by William Burke and William Hare in 1827 and 1828."

WHERE ARE THE LITTLE WOMEN?

Simpson's and Menefee's solution to the mystery is certainly dramatic: so much so, it seems, that nobody has actually asked whether the pair searched for news of any Scottish shipwreck from the early 1830s, as they suggest it might be wise to do. (It would appear that they did not.) The West Port murders, after all, were and remain notorious: They were committed in Edinburgh by two Irish laborers, Burke and Hare, to profit by supplying corpses to Edinburgh's medical school, where they were in great demand for dissection). The pair's victims, mostly indigents who, they supposed, would not be missed, numbered 17, of whom one expired of natural causes while the rest were murdered. The killers' trial, in which Hare turned King's evidence and Burke was convicted and later hanged, was one of the sensations of the age. Crucially, in the authors' view, the fact that all of the 17 victims were dissected, and consequently had no decent burial, may have inspired a "mimic burial" on Arthur's Seat: "Considering beliefs such as the alleged mimic burial given to Scottish sailors lost at sea, it would not be unreasonable for some person or person, in the absence of the 17 dissected bodies, to wish to propitiate these dead, the majority of whom were murdered in atrocious circumstances, by a form of burial to set their spirits at rest. While it is always possible that other disasters could have resulted in an identical casualty list, the West Port murders would appear to be a logical motivating force."

Since Simpson and Menefee first reported their findings in 1994, their thesis has been elaborated. The *Edinburgh Evening News* reported (2 Dec 2005) that George Dalgliesh, principal curator of Scottish history at the National Museum of Scotland, believes "the most credible theory is that were made by someone who knew Burke and Hare", and so had a strong motive to make amends for their crimes. Attempts to suggest that Burke himself may have manufactured and buried the pieces in an agony of contrition seem to fail on the problem that the murderers were arrested almost immediately after committing their 17th killing, leaving little or no time for any burial to be made; a DNA sample for Burke has been obtained from the murderer's skeleton, which is preserved at Edinburgh University, but no traces of DNA could be recovered from the buried figurines.

There is, moreover, one potentially fatal objection to the theory that the Arthur's Seat coffins are connected to the West Port murders: no fewer than 12 of Burke and Hare's victims were female, yet the clothed bodies found in the coffins were uniformly dressed in male attire.

Without knowing more about burial customs in early 19th-century Scotland it is hard to know how worrying this objection is, but certainly it would appear no more difficult to clothe a figurine in a miniature dress than it would be to stitch on trousers. In the absence of firm evidence of any connection to the activities of Burke and Hare, I would suggest the first step in any future investigation should be to examine Scottish newspapers published between, say, 1820 and 1836, for evidence of any other disasters involving the deaths of 17 people – ideally, none of them women.

NOTES

1 Fort, Complete Books, p169.

2 *Edinburgh Evening Post*, 20 August 1836

3 *Notes & Queries*, 3S. III, 4 April 1863.

4 *Proceedings of the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland* 36 (1901-02)

5 Samuel Pyeatt Menefee and Allen Simpson, 'The West Port murders and the miniature coffins from Arthur's Seat,' *The Book of the Old Edinburgh Club*, new series vol.3 (1994) pp63-81.

MIKE DASH is an historian and longtime fortean researcher. His numerous books, including **Borderlands** *(1997),* **Tulipomania** *(2000)* **Batavia's Graveyard** *(2002),* **Satan's Circus** *(2007) and* **The First Family** *(2009).*

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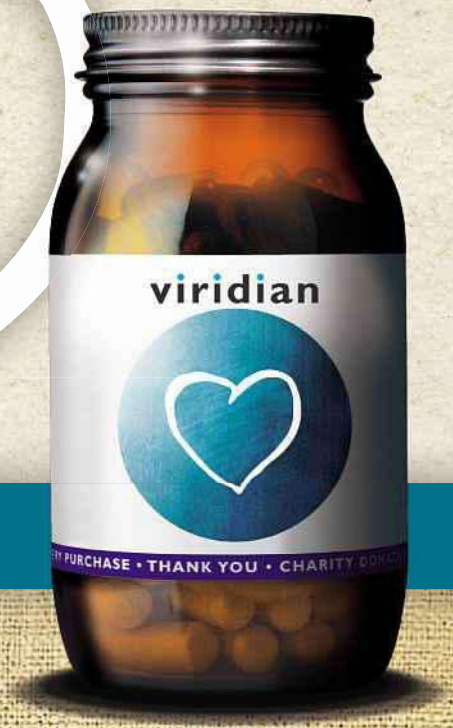

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STRANGE STORIES FROM SOUTHPORT

ROB GANDY unearths further tales of a Lancashire road ghost, as well as vanishing cars, weird lights, beach phantoms and the sound of invisible footsteps...

PAT REGAN

ABOVE: Hallsall Moss, whose flat fields and lonely roads seem to generate an unusually high number of road ghost/phantom hitchhiker encounters.

At Weird Weekend North 2016 (see "It's Weird Up North", **FT343:20-21**) I gave a presentation based on my *FT* article (**FT328:32-39**) about the Old Man of Halsall Moss (OMHM), a phantom hitchhiker/road ghost figure haunting the area between Southport, Merseyside, and Ormskirk, West Lancashire. Given the positive reception, I repeated the talk on 8 November 2016 in Birkdale village, Southport, Merseyside, to raise money for the local Queenscourt Hospice. This was doubly fortunate for me because, having worked in End-of-Life services, I knew many people working at the hospice, and its location on the edge of Southport meant it was very close to the area seemingly haunted by road ghosts and phantom hitchhikers.

FT readers will readily appreciate that once you start the ball rolling with paranormal stories, then more start to come out of the woodwork. And so it was: the hospice contacted me ahead of the event to tell me a gentleman had approached them saying that in 1974 he'd had an encounter on Halsall Moss but had never mentioned it to anyone because he did not think anyone would believe him (see "John's Story" below). Then, at the end of the evening, I spoke to several people, all with their own personal experiences. Obviously, I could not deal with them in the time available, but I took their contact details and then followed them up. I set out below this miscellany of strange stories from the Southport area, some relating to the OMHM. As with my previous research, I recorded and checked the testimonies until the witnesses and I were both satisfied that they were as accurate and complete as possible.

None of them could explain how the old man had disappeared

NEW TALES OF THE OLD MAN

I included a new OMHM story in my account of Weird Weekend North 2016. I set out the full testimony here, so that all those that I have collected are either in the original article or below. Because the testimonies in the original article were labelled Cases A to H, the three below are referred to as Cases I to K, to avoid potential confusion in the future.

CASE I: THE MOTHER-IN-LAW'S STORY

A university colleague showed my OMHM article to members of her family. By pure coincidence, her mother-in-law knew someone who'd had the sort of experience described. She was working in the TSB bank in Ainsdale during the late 1970s when a

ABOVE: New Cut, a stretch of road that features often in the stories about Halsall Moss. It was probably here that 'Miss W' and friends saw their vanishing 'drunken farmer'. **BELOW:** It was also where 'John' swerved to avoid a man dressed like an old farmer, his E-type Jaguar ending up in a field 50ft from the road.

management work colleague described what had happened to him whilst driving home to Wigan. During his journey he believed he had run someone over in his car, and had got out to look for the victim. He couldn't find anything, but he was so convinced that he had hit someone that he reported the incident to the police.

Although the bank staff did not know the complete detail of the incident, my colleague's mother-in-law recalls them thinking it was all quite funny (ha ha), especially the fact that he had told the police. This last point perhaps acts as an illustration of why people who have strange experiences are often reluctant to volunteer their stories.

CASE J: THE DRUNKEN FARMER

It was around 9.30-10.00pm on a September evening in either 2010 or 2011 when Miss W of Formby was with friends travelling across Halsall Moss to go to a party in Maghull. It was twilight, but the weather was clear. There were two cars, with four people in each; Miss W was a passenger in the front car.

When they were in the middle of the country, far from the nearest habitable house, they saw a man in the road, moving from the middle to one side. He appeared to be a bit drunk and talking to himself. Miss W describes him as wearing old, possibly Victorian, farmer-type clothing (and a hat), which looked quite dirty, and he was smoking a pipe. Both cars went around the man, but then they both stopped and turned round. Miss W says that this was because they decided to check that the man was

OK. It took about 20 seconds for them to get back to the spot where they had seen him, but there was no one there. There were fields to either side of the road, offering clear views for miles, with only a single derelict house anywhere near them. None of the friends could explain how the man could have disappeared from view in the time that had elapsed.

As Miss W recalls, the group of friends had called to pick someone up in the Ainsdale or Birkdale area on the way to the party, and after this experience they found themselves on the road that brought them out by the church in Halsall. This would almost certainly mean that the road where the man had disappeared was New Cut Lane/Gregory's Lane, which run into one another.

On the return journey, in the early hours of the next morning, when passing the same spot, the friends saw some police and a police car, so they stopped and asked what had happened. They were told that someone had called them out because they had seen a man walking in the road, apparently drunk and talking to himself. Like the friends, they had been worried, and had stopped and gone back, only to find that the man had completely disappeared. They therefore rang the police to come and help look for him. They had described the person as wearing farmer-type clothing....

CASE K: JOHN'S STORY

Following the contact from Queenscourt Hospice, I got in touch with John and took down his story.

John was driving his E-type Jaguar car down New Cut Lane at around 65 mph (105km/h) one evening in late 1974. He was heading towards Southport. It was 9.30 on a dark, wet night. As he approached a bend he saw a man standing in the middle of the road, dressed like an old farmer.

John swerved to miss the man and the car "took off" and flew into the adjacent field, which is several feet below the level of the road. He landed about 50ft (15m) from the

road and facing the wrong way. But when He checked the road there was no one to be seen. John does not drink, and says he can still remember the silence after he left the road.

An ambulance arrived and took him to Southport Hospital, where he was released later that night. The strange thing, in those pre-mobile phone days, is that John assumed that the people in the nearest farmhouse must have called the ambulance. But when he enquired with them the next day they said that they had not done so. Someone else had made the call, but to this day John has no idea who it could have been.

The next day John was driven back to the site and took photos of the car and surroundings. The insurance assessor was amazed at how little damage there was. He said the car "must have flown like an airplane", as it turned around in the air, and that a monocoque-designed car with no chassis, like the E-type Jaguar, should have folded when it landed.

John had not told his story to anyone until he saw that the OMHM event was taking place, mainly for fear of ridicule. He provided copies of photos of where the E-type Jaguar landed, and it beggars belief that he was not injured or the car more badly damaged. He has driven past that same spot nearly every day for over 30 years and still has no explanation for what happened.

STRANGE STORIES FROM SOUTHPORT

Unsurprisingly there are other strange stories attached to the Southport area. The first one is a simple but puzzling experience that was volunteered to me during my original research; but as it did not relate to road ghosts I excluded it. The last two stories both relate to the road, but are very, very different to those of the OMHM, as you will see.

ON AINSDALE BEACH

One local correspondent told me the following:

"The only strange experience I have had was on Ainsdale beach many years ago. I was walking along the beach and asked an elderly man in working clothes, boots and flat cap for the time as my watch had stopped. He just looked at me with a blank expression and carried on.

"I walked 10 paces and turned around to look and the beach was deserted! It has often puzzled me, as there was no way he could have climbed the sand hills in that time, because we were a good 100 yards from them."

FOOTSTEPS AT MIDNIGHT

It was around midnight one summer's night in the early 1980s when Mr A was driving his girlfriend home. She was concerned about her father's health, and so they stopped the car to talk things through. The Mini Clubman was parked under a street lamp in Oxford Road, Birkdale, outside the Royal National Institute for the Blind (RNIB) home for blind children (which is near the site of the reputedly haunted former Palace Hotel). The nearside door was adjacent to the kerb.

As they sat and talked, Mr A became aware of heavy footsteps slowly approaching, as of someone wearing leather soled and heeled shoes walking on the flagged pavement. The street lamp provided enough light to allow the couple to see each other, and the car windows enabled a clear view around the car. As they continued to chat, Mr A glanced over his shoulder, expecting to see perhaps a dog walker along the road; but there was nobody there.

Nevertheless, the footsteps continued, and so Mr A checked his rear view mirror, and looked again over his shoulder. As the footsteps finally reached the car, passing right beside them and beyond the bonnet, he got out of the driver's door, and, standing with it ajar, looked around. This was in part to check if there was some echo effect involved. Again, nobody was to be seen. By now his girlfriend had become noticeably concerned. She was normally a very calm, matter-of-fact person, but she shouted at Mr A to get her home immediately; which he did.

Having not discussed this event with her for perhaps some 35 years, Mr A contacted his now ex-girlfriend and asked her to write and share her recollections of that night. He was pleased, and somewhat surprised, to find that despite the years that had passed her recollections were exactly the same as his.

What could have been the cause of the couple clearly hearing footsteps that night? Given the passage of time, it will never be known, but Mr A is certain that it was not a misperception or some unusual sound effect. He is very familiar with acoustics and ran his own company in this very field. He is certain that something passed the Mini Clubman that night that made sounds like footsteps but which could not be seen. [1]

ARCS OF LIGHT

Mrs T was driving her black Hyundai Mica from Southport towards Tarleton to see her

DAVE MCALEAVY IMAGES / ALAMY STOCK PHOTO

ABOVE: The sandy expanse of Ainsdale Beach, near Southport; how did an elderly man in a flat cap vanish from view within seconds?

ABOVE: The abandoned Royal National Institute for the Blind home in Oxford Road, Birkdale, where Mr A and his girlfriend were somewhat alarmed to hear the sound of invisible footsteps.

mother, accompanied by her youngest son. Mrs T was 57 years old at the time and her son was 14 years old. They had had their dinner and so it was about 7pm on a dark, weekday evening, in the winter of 2015 (she thinks it was November). They were travelling eastwards at 50 mph (80km/h) along Southport New Road (A565). They had passed the Banks Roundabout and were just on to the mile-long straight stretch of dual carriageway, which runs up to the Riverside Caravan Park. The road is flat with open fields to either side.

Everything was normal, but when Mrs T looked up to her left she saw an arc of clear white light coming down towards them from the crescent Moon, touching the ground in the fields. The arc was similar in shape to that of a rainbow. Her son saw it as well.

When they looked to their right, through the hedge which ran down the middle of the dual carriageway, they saw that the headlights of the cars on the opposite carriageway were similarly clear white and arcing down to the ground, as were the streetlights on either side of the road. Mrs T and her son had both witnessed these light effects looking out of all of the car windows, and in all cases there was a strong, sharp border to the light. Everything else that they saw, such as nearby houses, looked normal.

They overtook a dark car with two ladies in it; Mrs T recalls that one had short silver hair and looked about 60 years old. This only took a matter of seconds, but when Mrs T looked in the driver's mirror and the wing mirror there was no car behind them. The car with the two ladies had simply disappeared. There were no cars at all behind them, with the nearest in front being some way ahead. There was also nowhere to turn off. Mrs T and her son then realised that the Moon was now on the right of them and all of the arcs of light had gone. The whole experience had taken no more than about a minute.

When Mrs T and her son were on the return journey at around 10pm they realised that the streetlights for the road were down the middle of the dual carriageway and *not* either side of it, as they had been earlier. Naturally, Mrs T and her son discussed the details of what they had seen and agreed on all points. Neither of them can explain what they observed, and it is worth noting that when they first saw the crescent Moon with the light arcing down, it would have meant that the Moon was placed to the north of their position, which was a complete impossibility. When this is combined with the other observed phenomena – the lights arcing down with strong, sharp borders; the streetlights being seen either side of the dual carriageway when they are actually down the middle; and the disappearance of the car with the two ladies in it – what happened to Mrs T and her son can only be described as weird with a capital "W".

FINAL THOUGHTS

The new OMHM cases are intriguing in their consistency with some of the stories in the earlier article: New Cut Lane/Gregory's Lane is again the main focus, as is the appearance of a man dressed like an old farmer. Indeed, Alan the taxi driver (Case C) was convinced he had run over "an oldish guy wearing a cap" and a farmer's-type jacket on Gregory's Lane.

We cannot be certain where the Ainsdale bank worker thought he ran someone over, but New Cut Lane/Gregory's Lane is arguably the most likely route for someone travelling from Ainsdale to Wigan. I now have first-hand testimonies in double-figures in a fairly well-defined area, which by any measure is remarkable; a flying E-type Jaguar just adds to the weirdness. The other three stories are very different, but serve to highlight the variety of forteana that can be experienced unexpectedly in comparatively mundane circumstances within a fairly limited geographical area.

As with all of the other testimonies collected locally, I am confident of the witnesses' sincerity. Several involved multiple witnesses, which adds to their value. Of course, there may well be physical and psychological explanations for the experiences described (some of which I considered in my original article), but I am sure that readers will agree that they are not obvious.

The Queenscourt evening suggests there is quite an appetite amongst the general public for hearing about ghosts, if perhaps not more esoteric fortean phenomena. The audience raised many, well-informed questions and we had a lively discussion. What struck me was whether those of us with interests in this area attend too many events, such as conferences, where the attendees are like-minded people rather than members of the general public. Delivering tales of "real" ghost experiences to the general public in accessible venues and at accessible times can attract people who would not otherwise come forward. Events "for good causes" also mean people have no problem justifying their attendance with friends and family, and seeing that others have had similar encounters can give them the confidence to volunteer their own stories. Perhaps this is the perfect way to gather more fortean material…

NOTES

1 Mr A described some ghost-related stories in the immediate area, without having quotable references. Soon after, and only a few yards away from the "footsteps" event, a property owner sought planning permission to demolish a large house. The local press reported him saying it was haunted and he would not allow his young children to stay there any longer. Some suspected a ruse to enable site development (it is now a block of flats) but he remained steadfast. In a separate case, at a nearby junction, a young man asked his mother to stop the car when he spotted a little boy, aged about four or five, standing on the corner looking lost. The boy was wearing a duffle coat and holding a small suitcase. They slowed and looked around but the boy had suddenly disappeared. The young man became agitated and angry, insisting his mother must have seen the boy; but she hadn't. It is interesting to note that the RNIB home itself was bombed in April 1941, during WWII, killing three nurses; but remarkably all 27 small children, all under seven years of age, survived. *www.southportvisiter.co.uk/news/southport-west-lancs/ve-day-70th-anniversary-night-9225509*.

ROB GANDY is a visiting professor at the Liverpool Business School, John Moores University. A regular contributor to FT, he has written on ghostlore, football curses, hoaxes, statistics, souling plays and phantom hitchhikers.

The Tribe of Wannabe

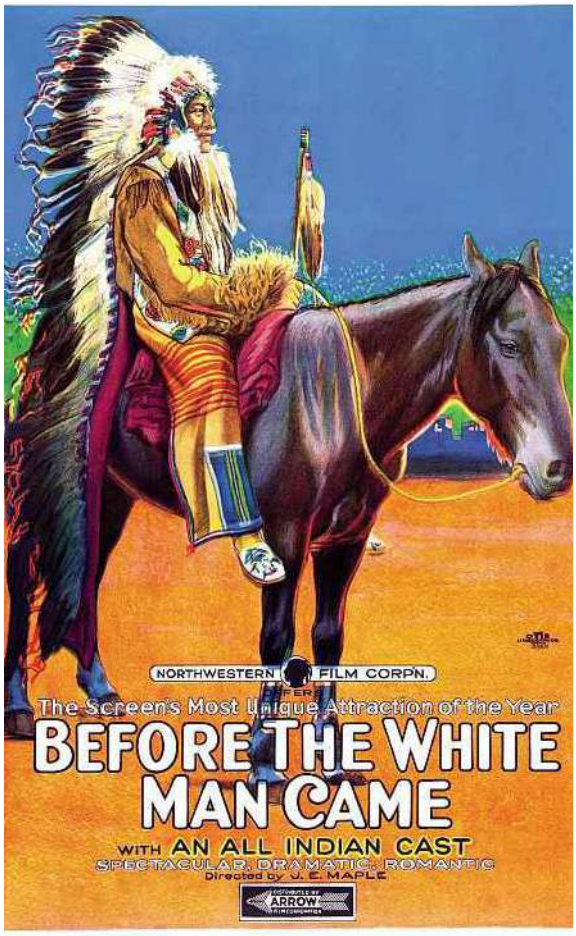
Many white Americans – from Johnny Cash to Senator Elizabeth Warren – have made spurious claims of Native American heritage. **PAUL WILLETTS** looks back at some of the most brazen imposters, from Red Fox and "the Crying Indian" to con-man Chief White Elk.

It's hard to be certain what motivates people who don't just pretend to be someone else, but also pose as members of a different race. Lots of these racial imposters have reinvented themselves as Native Americans, perhaps encouraged – in the United States at least – by a centuries-old tradition of whites donning tribal costume.

Most famously, in 1773, supporters of a clandestine American revolutionary group called the Sons of Liberty disguised themselves as Mohawks before boarding three British ships and then decanting a huge quantity of valuable imported tea into Boston Harbor. Via a quasi-Masonic brotherhood called the Improved Order of Red Men, which had its roots in the rebellion against British colonial rule, cultural cross-dressing of this kind spread across America during the 19th and early 20th centuries. For the Red Men's private ceremonies and public parades, a rough approximation of Native American attire was worn by its members, who at one stage numbered half a million; so mainstream did the organisation become that President Theodore Roosevelt was a member.

Dressing up as Native Americans is merely the most visible manifestation of a tendency that has seen a surprising number of whites claiming Native American ancestry. The fact that genuine Native Americans felt the need to coin a label for these imposters – a label that's both dismissive and wryly humorous – demonstrates just how common they are. They're described as belonging to "the tribe of Wannabe."

Within that ethnic group, which has been consistently ignored by the US Census, the most numerous sub-category appears to be the Not Quite Native – white people who make the spurious claim that they're *part*-Native American. Included among these are Miley Cyrus, Johnny Cash, ex-President Bill Clinton and Senator Elizabeth Warren, one of the rising stars of the Democratic Party (and nicknamed 'Pocahontas' by President Trump). Needless to say, none of this ill-assorted club has produced documentary evidence to verify their claims to Cherokee ancestry.



LEFT: Edgar Laplante (aka Chief White Elk) claimed to have been part of the all-Native American cast of this 1920 film. **FACING PAGE:** Studio portrait of Laplante, posing as Chief White Elk, c.1918.

The self-styled Grey Owl was Archie Belaney from Hastings

GREY OWL & CO

A much more interesting branch of the Wannabe comprises the professional fraudsters who adopt a wholly Native American identity. Thanks to a 1999 biopic directed by Richard Attenborough and starring Pierce Brosnan, the most prominent of these is Archie Belaney (1888-1938), better known as Grey Owl (see **FT191:10**). Until Grey Owl's posthumous exposure, he was revered as an author, conservationist and what would now be termed a Canadian national treasure. By a delicious irony, just two years before his death he featured within a volume called *Indians of Today*, which provided an array of short biographical sketches that were condescendingly aimed at demonstrating "the progress of the American Indian race". The book referred to him as being the three-eighths Apache son of a scout for Colonel William F Cody – who, of course, later made a showbiz career under the nickname Buffalo Bill.

In reality, though, the self-styled Grey Owl was a white Englishman from Hastings. At the age of 18, he'd emigrated to Canada, where he could enact a fantasy version of himself that seems to have been inspired by childhood readings of James Fenimore Cooper's novel *The Last of the Mohicans* and Henry Wadsworth Longfellow's epic poem *Hiawatha*.

A more recent, and equally famous, Wannabe was Lousiana-born Espera Oscar de Corti (1904-1999). Shunning his Italian immigrant heritage, de Corti morphed into Iron Eyes Cody, a part Cree, part Cherokee character actor, consultant on Hollywood Westerns such as *A Man Called Horse*, and star of a famous American television advert, often cited as being responsible for the rise of that nation's modern environmental movement. The advert, screened in 1971 to promote the non-profit "Keep America Beautiful" campaign, opens with a shot of a man paddling down a river. To the accompaniment of a slow drumbeat, the canoeist is revealed as a Native American with two long braids of hair and a feather protruding from his headband. Soon the camera pulls back sufficiently to show that

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the surrounding landscape isn't the pastoral idyll we assumed it to be. Now we see the river's litter-strewn banks and the distant factory chimneys, from which noxious clouds of smoke billow. Preceded by a voice-over stating that "People start pollution and people can stop it", the advert climaxes in a close-up of the canoeist standing on the riverbank and shedding a single tear.

This bravura piece of advertising installed the man dubbed "the Crying Indian" as his country's most recognisable Native American. Twenty-five years later, by which time he'd published a memoir that contained more fiction than the average novel, his true identity would be exposed by an investigative journalist from the *New Orleans Times-Picayune*. In that era before widespread access to broadband, the revelation that he was no more Native American than Bill Clinton eluded the obituarists at the *Guardian* and the *Independent*. They relished portraying Iron Eyes Cody as that Hollywood rarity, a genuine Native American who'd been cast in the cowboy films of the 1930s and 1940s.

He and Grey Owl were not, however, the only such flamboyant, self-publicising imposters who managed both to hoodwink the public and achieve national fame. The adventures of William J Humes (1884-1976) follow a similar but more dramatic trajectory.

Iron Eyes Cody was the country's most recognisable Native American

RED FOX

Hailing from urban Baltimore, this once celebrated Wannabe called himself Chief Red Fox and sundry variations on that name and title, the most colourful of these being the Reverend Red Fox Francis St James Skiuhushu. He tried to confer a bogus legitimacy on his European-looking features by claiming that these derived from his ancestors' Indian blood being mixed with that of the Welsh colonists whose presence had, according to him, predated the arrival of Columbus (for Pre-Columbian Welsh settlers in the New World, see **FT167:38-41, 168:28-31**).

Like many of the Wannabe, Red Fox said he'd attended Carlisle Indian Industrial School, easily the most widely recognised of the many boarding schools to which Native American children were forcibly sent by the US government as a way of trying to assimilate them into white society. By 1914 he'd become involved with the recently founded Society of American Indians, a group that sought to promote Native American culture and civil rights. His activism found more tangible form, though, in his contribution to the campaign to persuade the federal government to create a new national holiday: American Indian Day.

As part of that campaign, he rode from state to state collecting endorsements. He eventually delivered his petition to the White House. By 1919, half-a-dozen states,

TOPICAL PRESS AGENCY / GETTY IMAGES

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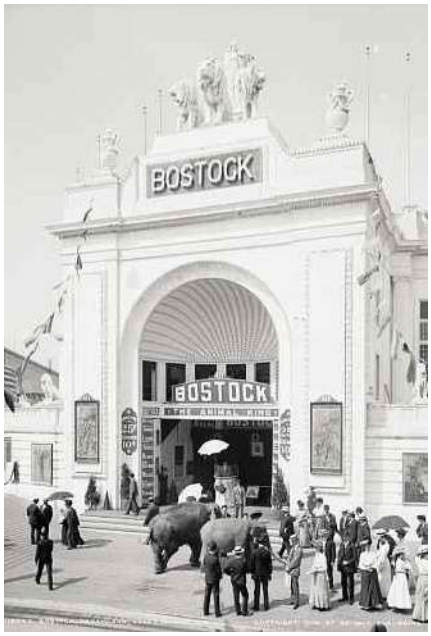
TOP: Fake Native American actor Iron Eyes Cody in the 1971 'Keep America Beautiful' campaign. **ABOVE LEFT:** The revered author and environmentalist Grey Owl, who was in fact Englishman Archie Belaney from Hastings. **ABOVE RIGHT:** Edgar Laplante's onetime employer and fellow imposter, William J Humes, who masquerader as Chief Red Fox. Posed in front of the White House in 1915, Red Fox had just ridden across the country and delivered a petition to the US President.



BOTH PHOTOS: LIBRARY OF CONGRESS PRINTS AND PHOTOGRAPHIC DIVISION

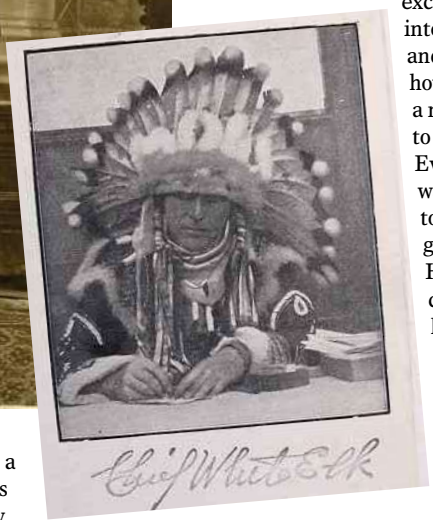
ABOVE LEFT: Bostock's Animal Arena in the Greater Dreamland amusement park, Coney Island, where Laplante worked during the summer of 1910. **ABOVE RIGHT:** A ballyhoo man at work at Greater Dreamland c.1911. **BELOW:** Studio portrait of Edgar Laplante, c.1918, and a signed photo of him as Chief White Elk.

New York and Connecticut among them, were celebrating American Indian Day. Red Fox had meanwhile set up a parallel organisation to the Society of American Indians. He named it the Tepee Order, and it incorporated elements of the Boy Scout movement and various whites-only fraternal organisations. What's more, he was ordained as a minister of the Christian Disciples Church. In that guise, he founded a religious mission school on the Yakima Indian Reservation in Washington State.

For much of his life, Red Fox earned a living by giving lectures on Native American culture and demonstrations of traditional skills. Yet, as one sceptical small-town journalist observed of his lassoing technique, he had trouble roping "objects that move[d] slower than a hearse."

Doubts about whether or not he was a genuine Sioux chief were being aired not long after America's entry into World War I. Readers would have to wait almost half a century, though, before that question received a satisfactory answer. It arrived courtesy of what initially appeared to be the old rogue's moment of supreme triumph, which came with the publication of *The Memoirs of Chief Red Fox*. First released under the McGraw-Hill imprint in 1971, the book ascended the bestseller charts in America and abroad, opening up Red Fox's life to a disastrous level of scrutiny.

Large chunks of his reminiscences of his father's involvement at the Battle of the Little Big Horn turned out to have been plagiarised from the work of an historian; and his account of growing up on the Pine Ridge Indian Reservation in South Dakota provoked letters from several of its residents stating that they'd never previously heard of him. Such is the enduringly seductive strength of the Chief Red Fox persona that



Wikipedia nevertheless continues to portray him as a bona fide Sioux chief and as the son of the warrior Crazy Horse.

THE BIRTH OF WHITE ELK

Strange though the lives of Red Fox, Grey Owl and Iron Eyes Cody were, they pale in comparison to the gloriously absurd escapades of their fellow Wannabe, Edgar Laplante (1888-1944), who also happens to be the least known of this group. But that wasn't always the case. During the mid-1920s, the handsome and charismatic Laplante rose to worldwide prominence. He got there via a circuitous route. Born into a working-class French-Canadian family, he grew up in a Rhode Island mill-town where he started playing truant from the local Catholic school and mixing with boys whom his sardonic father labelled "bums". Those boys had, as his father put it, helped him to get into "a lot of little jams", which culminated in the 14-year-old Laplante playing a con-trick on several of the city centre shopkeepers.

In search of nothing more than excitement, he'd wander into one of the shops and spin a yarn about how he'd been asked by a nearby shopkeeper to fetch some change. Even at that age, he was plausible enough to talk people into giving him money. He'd then pocket the cash and hand it to his father under the pretence that it was his weekly wage from a part-time job. One afternoon he came unstuck when he tried to scam a saloon owner, who detained him and summoned the police. Next day, Laplante found himself in court, facing a charge of larceny. He ended up being sentenced to a spell at a surprisingly enlightened Rhode Island reform school, where he had the opportunity to hone his exceptional ability as a singer.

Unlike many of his fellow inmates, he couldn't knuckle down to a conventional

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life after his release. Instead, he left his family and found seasonal employment at the Greater Dreamland amusement park on Coney Island, a brash and bustling seaside resort just to the south of New York City. Over the summer of 1910, he worked as a so-called "ballyhoo man". Perched every afternoon and evening on a small stage outside Bostock's Animal Arena, he was required to attract a crowd by any means, be it singing, shouting, or babbling incomprehensibly. Assisting him in that respect was the Native American costume with which his employer kitted him out. He had to distract passers-by from the competing sights, sounds and smells, not least from other exotically attired ballyhoo men such as the "Wild Man of Borneo", who was in fact a white European from the Bronx, his face darkened by generous applications of burnt cork. Once a crowd had gathered around the stage where Laplante was performing, he made way for the "barker", who began a shouted spiel designed to coax people into the Animal Arena, which featured everything from a snake-charming act to a three-round boxing bout between a kangaroo and its trainer (for more boxing kangaroo acts, see **FT360:40-45**).

Talent-spotted that summer, Laplante landed another job that required him to impersonate a Native American. His new job was with Dr WH Long's Big Indian and Medicine Concert Company, one of numerous travelling shows that sold quack remedies to customers lured by the prospect of as much as two hours of free, or at least very cheap, vaudeville-style entertainment. Dr Long's Philadelphia-based troupe exploited the vogue for Native American-themed medicine shows. These tapped into white Americans' widespread belief that Native Americans enjoyed superior health due to traditional remedies passed from generation to generation. When he ultimately left Dr Long's show, Laplante set himself up as what was known as "a pitchman" – a vendor of patent medicine. Still sporting a feathered headdress and tasselled buckskins, he sold his products in towns and cities from Boston to St Louis. For pitchmen, the line between salesmanship and criminality was blurred, offering Laplante an entrée into life as a professional conman and imposter. Following a spell in jail for impersonating a government official, he embarked on a tentative career as a singer in vaudeville, America's version of the British variety theatre.

By the time America belatedly entered

World War I, Laplante was a draft dodger operating under a string of aliases. What could be seen as the turning point of his life occurred in the autumn of 1917 when he started taking theatrical bookings under the name of Chief White Elk, purportedly a war hero, sporting star and leader of the Canadian Cherokee. He then drifted from city to city, performing at theatres and posing as a US government recruiter and fundraiser.

His charm and powers of persuasion were such that, within only a few days of rolling up in Salt Lake City in March 1918, he had arranged to marry a glamorous young Native American woman whom he'd met there. Impressed by both Laplante's persona as a Cherokee chief and his bride-to-be's assumed title as a princess from the Klamath tribe, the Governor of Utah fixed up a public wedding for them on the steps of the city's State Capitol. Five-thousand people – possibly including the Marx Brothers – attended the ceremony, at which the Governor officiated.

Laplante's wife, Burtha Thompson, also known as Princess Ah-Tra-Ah-Saun, never suspected her husband of being neither a chief nor a Cherokee; but marriage to him soon exposed her to his heavy-drinking and bisexual promiscuity, not to mention his subsequent addiction to morphine and cocaine, the latter of which must've nourished his increasingly grandiose alter ego. By the start of 1922, their marriage was over.

AN AMERICAN IN PARIS

Now accompanied by a boyfriend who masqueraded as his secretary, Laplante, under the name of Chief White Elk, headed for London. His avowed intention was to

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ABOVE LEFT: Chief White Elk and his new bride, Burtha Thompson, photographed just after their marriage ceremony at the Utah State Capitol, Salt Lake City, 13 March 1918. **ABOVE LEFT:** Portrait of Thompson and Laplante, probably taken in Washington State by their friend, the photographer, Emma B Freeman, c.1918. **ABOVE RIGHT:** Poster for the big budget 1923 Western epic whose European release Laplante helped to promote in France and Belgium.

seek an audience with King George V and plead for better educational opportunities for Cherokee youth. St James's Palace agreed to schedule a meeting between these two rulers of their people, yet it never took place, because a reporter from the *Daily Mail* discovered that White Elk wasn't Canadian – and, consequently, wasn't a British subject.

To earn a living while he was in Britain, he toured the country's variety theatres, where he appeared on the same bill as dancers, trapeze artistes and, on several occasions, a man who was supposedly "Britain's foremost singing ventriloquist". At venues such as the Woolwich Hippodrome and the Leamington Spa Theatre Royal, White Elk sang, talked about Native American culture, and demonstrated his interpretation of a Cherokee war dance.

In Manchester he wooed a local switchboard operator, involved her in a bigamous marriage, and then took her and her seven-year-old son across the Channel, first for a booking on the Normandy coast and afterwards down to Paris for a stint at one of the city's decadent and fashionable cabarets. While he was there, he began frequenting the Café du Dôme, haunt of Pablo Picasso, Henri Matisse, James Joyce and other luminaries of the arts world.

His cabaret booking completed, White Elk found employment as chaperone to a group of genuine Arapaho, shipped over from their Wyoming reservation in order to promote *The Covered Wagon*, a new hit Western in which they'd acted. When the Arapaho decided to return home, Paramount Pictures employed White Elk to substitute for them in Paris and on the remainder of the film's Continental tour. Ditching his wife and stepson, he accompanied the movie to Brussels, where he was treated like a visiting monarch, and where he conned a gullible Belgian aristocrat out of her life savings.

From Brussels, he moved to Marseilles and then Nice, capital of the French Riviera, synonymous with the luxury hotels to which the figureheads of European high society flocked each winter. In Nice, he met Milania Khevenhûller-Metsch, a fabulously rich, 63-year-old Hungarian countess, who was convalescing with her grown-up stepdaughter. Both women fell for his Cherokee shtick and his story about how he owned Canadian oilfields, the earnings from which were being temporarily withheld by the British government. On that basis, the two doting countesses started lending him vast sums of money to tide him over until the oil income came through. Milania even chartered a steamship for him to tour Italy and spread the word about the British government's reprehensible treatment of the Cherokee.

Wherever his ship docked, large numbers of people greeted White Elk, who had meanwhile bestowed on himself the title of Prince Tewanna Rey. He was also welcomed by delegations from Benito Mussolini's fascist government, who showered him with gifts and other tokens of their esteem, not least the rank of honorary corporal in the militia, a rank that sounds lowly but was only trumped by Mussolini himself.

Towards the end of White Elk's joy-ride through Italy, which generated newspaper coverage everywhere from Australia to America, proto-rock star-like hysteria surrounded him. Poverty-stricken fans would lay siege to his hotel, wanting to catch a glimpse of him and to pocket some of the banknotes he'd begun distributing with suitably regal largesse. In the space of just a few months, he fed his sense of himself as an important person by conducting a Robin Hood-style redistribution of the equivalent of as much as $58.9 million in 2018 currency.

Milania and her stepdaughter were so gullible that they believed even his most ridiculous stories about himself and his homeland. These included an account of how two neighbouring rivers meandered across his kingdom, one of them ice-cold and stocked with a plentiful supply of fish, which could be plucked from the water and cooked in the hot water that flowed down the other river.

Only becoming suspicious about White Elk when he failed to repay his numerous loans on the agreed date, Milania's stepdaughter launched an investigation of him during the closing weeks of 1924. Her findings brought his European adventures to an abrupt end and landed him in jail, first in Switzerland and then in Italy.

Even after he'd been deported to America in 1929, promising that he was a reformed character, he continued his long-running career as a member of the tribe of Wannabe. He'd surely have been delighted that, in the wake of his death in January 1944, the Arizona authorities ratified the role he'd been playing for so long. They registered him as "White Eagle, Dr, Indian male."

NEW ORLEANS STATES

STATES' MAGAZINE SECTION

WHEN THE LOVELY COUNTESS FOUND HER DEAR INDIAN PRINCE A SWINDLER LIAR IMPOSTOR

Amazing Fraud of the Modern Cagliostro, Who Duped Europe as "Chief White Elk," Jailed as La Plante, Much-Married, of Pawtucket, Rhode Island

Gave $1,500,000; Now He's Broke

Indian Recalls Days When He Posed as Lavish Benefactor in Italy

Reviews Days, Nights He Spent in Lambasting Fascist Prison

PAUL WILLETTS is the author of **King Con: The Bizarre Adventures of the Jazz Age's Greatest Imposter** (Penguin Random House, 2018). Visit www.paulwilletts.com for more information about this and Paul's other books.

LEFT: The 23 August 1925 issue of the *New Orleans States* magazine section told the story of Laplante's imposture. **BELOW:** A 1942 news story about the 54-year-old Laplante.

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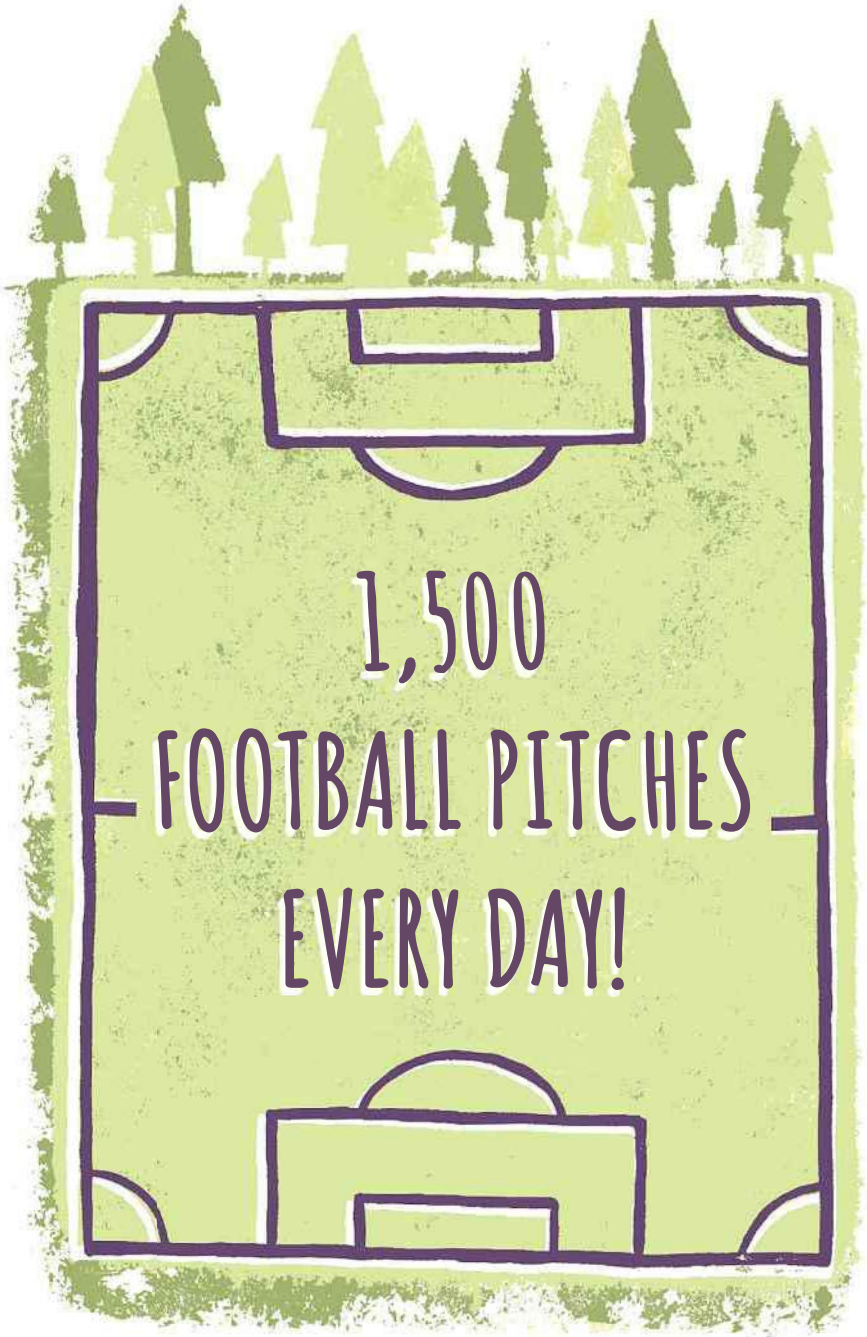

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Dundry's mediæval mystery stone

TED HARRISON asks why stone from an obscure Somerset quarry turns up in churches across Wales and Ireland

The Dundry quarry is long defunct and the village of Dundry, just south of Bristol, is little known; but in mediæval times it was at the centre of a thriving and sacred industry.

Dundry stone was the 'must-have' material for masons throughout much of Wales and Ireland when they needed a special material to adorn a high-status abbey or cathedral. Carved blocks were hauled from the quarry along the old Roman road to the river Avon to be transported by water to western coastal ports. It was used in the building of Llandaff Cathedral and in St David's, and can be found 20 miles inland from Cardigan Bay at Strata Florida Abbey. The Cistercian Abbey at Whitland in Carmarthenshire made extensive use of Dundry Stone. It was sometimes called 'Ty Gwyn ar Daf' – The White House on the River Taf – referring to the stone's colour.

And dozens of local churches throughout Wales, although built from local materials, paid for a single block of carved Dundry stone for the font.

Although many of Wales's oldest churches were destroyed by over-zealous Victorian modernisers and replaced by dull, uniform buildings, what often does remain of an ancient church is its font, made ubiquitously from Dundry stone. There's not even a replacement church surviving in the tiny Ceredigion village of Llandygwydd, but there's still an ancient Dundry stone font standing exposed to the elements in the churchyard.

In Ireland, Dundry stone was used in building Dublin's Christchurch Cathedral. It is found in Cloyne Cathedral and extensively in churches and monasteries from Kinsale in County Cork to Trim in County Meath. Yet Ireland has plenty of good building stone of its own, so why should mediæval religious establishments have gone to the expense of importing this single type of non-oolitic Jurassic limestone from an obscure Somerset quarry?

STEVE TAYLOR ARPS / ALAMY STOCK PHOTO

LEFT: The dole table in the churchyard of St Michael's, Dundry.

One suggestion is that the masons involved were largely brought in by the Normans following the 12th century invasion of Ireland – and these craftsmen were familiar with the carving of Dundry stone.

At the English Stone Forum Conference in 2005, geologist Dr Tim Palmer explained its widespread use as "likely to have arisen from the relative ease with which it could be shipped from the quarries just south of Bristol, into boats on the River Avon and thence to faraway destinations".

In a paper from 1970 in the *Ulster Journal of Archæology*, DM Waterman reviewed the use of imported stones in Ireland and noted that Dundry stone was largely found on sites near to ports or navigable waterways "confirming the importance of water-borne transport in the Middle Ages".

Yet such practical explanations cannot be the whole story. Why did mediæval church builders mostly use local materials, but feel the urge to import Dundry stone for the font – the item of greatest sacramental importance? Why was the Sutton Stone from Glamorgan, which had very similar properties, displaced by Dundry stone whenever it could be afforded? Why was it that the Dundry stone font was frequently saved when the rest of an old church was knocked down by over-enthusiastic Victorians?

Dundry quarry was at the heart of an area of the West Country with a strong mystical tradition. Dundry is within easy reach of Glastonbury, the legendary Avalon, and Priddy, the village said to have been visited by Jesus during his supposed childhood visit to Britain, an idea evoked by William Blake in his poem 'Jerusalem'. Dundry lies on the Roman road along which visitors landing from ships on the Avon would have travelled to get to the county's Roman lead mines and along which, if the legend is true, Joseph of Arimathea would have walked with the young Christ.

The area had huge significance in the pre-Christian era; Stanton Drew, the second largest stone circle in Britain, is just an hour's walk away.

Throughout the mediæval period, the quarrymen and stone carvers of Dundry ran a highly successful business. In the same way that the monks at Glastonbury realised there was money to be made out of emphasising the unique spirituality of their abbey, so, I would suggest, the entrepreneurs of Dundry, with the encouragement of the lord of the manor – the Bishop of Bath and Wells – played on the spiritual qualities of the 'Dundry' brand. Able to ship carved stone via established sea routes, they carved out a lucrative market for themselves in the Celtic west.

The stone was good quality, but was quite possibly marketed as much more than that. It was taken from the sacred landscape where, allegedly, Jesus had walked. The sacred properties attributed to it thus made it an ideal material to contain the holy water of the baptismal font. In Dundry churchyard there is a 5ft (1.5m) cube of locally quarried stone. It has been used as a dole table – a place where debts were settled and contracts signed – but one theory is that originally it was there as a stone sample to show potential purchasers.

Quarrying at Dundry came to an end around 1540 when the best quality stone was exhausted and the Reformation brought the end of many 'superstitious' practices. Although quarrying was resumed for some inferior stone between 1850 and 1910, the source of Dundry stone is now unrecognisable as a place of either religious or industrial significance.

TED HARRISON is a former BBC religious affairs correspondent. He is a writer, artist, and a regular FT contributor.

In search of the Salzburg Cube

This infamous out-of-place artefact is not a cube and you won't find it in Salzburg, explains ULRICH MAGIN…

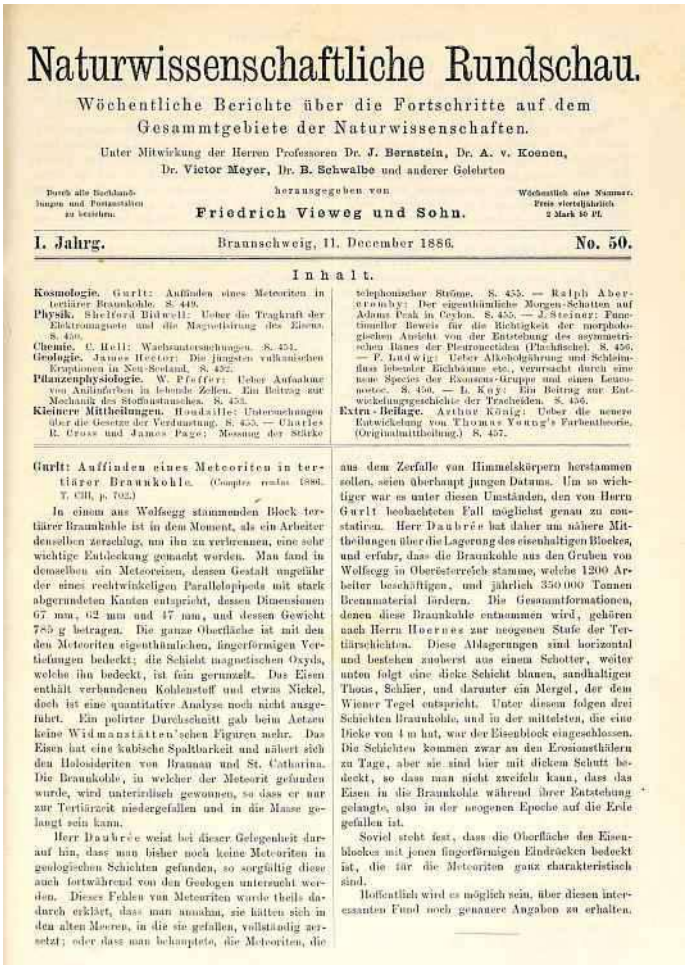
A cube of metal, carefully machined, notched, and rounded on one side, was found in the centre of a block of coal in Austria in 1885", John Keel breathlessly tells us in his wildly excited book *Our Haunted Planet*. "It's still in a museum in Salzburg and no one has ever come up with an explanation for it. Basing their conclusions on the age of the coal bed, various experts have estimated it to be 300,000 years old."

This cube of pure steel from Salzburg in Austria, perfectly fashioned and with a groove in the centre, unearthed in fossil layers and therefore not the handiwork of any known civilisation, is one of the most frequently listed OOPARTS or out-of-place artefacts. Some writers even allege that it has vanished from the museum, perhaps hidden by sinister conspirators in a vain attempt to hide the truth – which would be easy to believe were you to look for it in the Salzburg Museum. It's not there; instead, it is, in fact still being exhibited, for all to see, in the Heimathaus Museum of Vöcklabruck, Upper Austria.

Variously called the 'Salzburg Cube' or 'Dr Gurlt's Cube', the object probably gained most of its fame in the English-speaking world because Charles Fort mentioned it in *The Book of the Damned*.[1]

Fort, in summary, has this to say:

"A block of metal found in coal, in Austria, 1885. It is now in the Salsburg museum… We're a little involved here. Our own acceptance is upon a carved, geometric thing that, if found in a very old deposit, antedates human life, except, perhaps, very primitive human life, as an indigenous product of this Earth: but we're quite as much interested in the dilemma it made for the faithful. It is of 'true meteoritic material'. In *L'Astronomie*, 7-114, it is said that, though so geometric, its phenomena so characteristic of meteorites exclude the idea that it was the work of man. As to the deposit – Tertiary coal. Composition – iron carbon, and a small quantity of nickel. It has a pitted surface that is supposed by the faithful to be characteristic of meteorites… The scientists who examined it could reach no agreement. They bifurcated: then a compromise was suggested; but the compromise is a product of disregard: That it was of true meteoritic material, and had not been shaped by man; That it was not of true meteoritic material, but telluric iron that had been shaped by man; That it was true meteoritic material that had fallen from the sky, but had been shaped by man, after its fall. The data, one or more of which must be disregarded by each of these three explanations, are: 'true meteoritic material' and surface markings of meteorites; geometric form; presence in an ancient deposit; material as hard as steel; absence upon this earth, in Tertiary times, of men who could work in material as hard as steel. It is said that, though of 'true meteoritic material', this object is virtually a steel object… It's a cube. There is a deep incision all around it. Of its faces, two that are opposite are rounded."



Naturwissenschaftliche Rundschau.

Wöchentliche Berichte über die Fortschritte auf dem Gesammtgebiete der Naturwissenschaften.

Unter Mitwirkung der Herren Professoren Dr. J. Bernstein, Dr. A. v. Koenen, Dr. Victor Meyer, Dr. B. Schwalbe und anderer Gelehrten

herausgegeben von

Friedrich Vieweg und Sohn.

I. Jahrg. Braunschweig, 11. December 1886. No. 50.

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Gurlt: Auffinden eines Meteoriten in tertiärer Braunkohle. (Comptes rendus 1886. T. CIII, p. 702.)

In einem aus Wolfsegg stammenden Block tertiärer Braunkohle ist in dem Moment, als ein Arbeiter denselben zerschlug, um ihn zu verbrennen, eine sehr wichtige Entdeckung gemacht worden. Man fand in demselben ein Meteoreisen, dessen Gestalt ungefähr der eines rechtwinkeligen Parallelopipeds mit stark abgerundeten Kanten entspricht, dessen Dimensionen 67 mm, 62 mm und 47 mm, und dessen Gewicht 785 g betragen. Die ganze Oberfläche ist mit den den Meteoriten eigenthümlichen, fingerförmigen Vertiefungen bedeckt; die Schicht magnetischen Oxyds, welche ihn bedeckt, ist fein gerunzelt. Das Eisen enthält verbundenen Kohlenstoff und etwas Nickel, doch ist eine quantitative Analyse noch nicht ausgeführt. Ein polirter Durchschnitt gab beim Aetzen keine Widmanstätten'schen Figuren mehr. Das Eisen hat eine kubische Spaltbarkeit und nähert sich den Holosideriten von Braunau und St. Catharina. Die Braunkohle, in welcher der Meteorit gefunden wurde, wird unterirdisch gewonnen, so dass er nur zur Tertiärzeit niedergefallen und in die Masse gelangt sein kann.

Herr Daubrée weist bei dieser Gelegenheit darauf hin, dass man bisher noch keine Meteoriten in geologischen Schichten gefunden, so sorgfältig diese auch fortwährend von den Geologen untersucht werden. Dieses Fehlen von Meteoriten wurde theils dadurch erklärt, dass man annahm, sie hätten sich in den alten Meeren, in die sie gefallen, vollständig zersetzt; oder dass man behauptete, die Meteoriten, die aus dem Zerfalle von Himmelskörpern herstammen sollen, seien überhaupt jungen Datums. Um so wichtiger war es unter diesen Umständen, den von Herrn Gurlt beobachteten Fall möglichst genau zu constatiren. Herr Daubrée hat daher um nähere Mittheilungen über die Lagerung des eisenhaltigen Blockes, und erfuhr, dass die Braunkohle aus den Gruben von Wolfsegg in Oberösterreich stamme, welche 1200 Arbeiter beschäftigen, und jährlich 350 000 Tonnen Brennmaterial fördern. Die Gesammtformationen, denen diese Braunkohle entnommen wird, gehören nach Herrn Hoernes zur neogenen Stufe der Tertiärschichten. Diese Ablagerungen sind horizontal und bestehen zuoberst aus einem Schotter, weiter unten folgt eine dicke Schicht blauen, sandhaltigen Thons, Schlier, und darunter ein Mergel, der dem Wiener Tegel entspricht. Unter diesem folgen drei Schichten Braunkohle, und in der mittelsten, die eine Dicke von 4 m hat, war der Eisenblock eingeschlossen. Die Schichten kommen zwar an den Erosionsthälern zu Tage, aber sie sind hier mit dickem Schutt bedeckt, so dass man nicht zweifeln kann, dass das Eisen in die Braunkohle während ihrer Entstehung gelangte, also in der neogenen Epoche auf die Erde gefallen ist.

Soviel steht fest, dass die Oberfläche des Eisenblockes mit jenen fingerförmigen Eindrücken bedeckt ist, die für die Meteoriten ganz charakteristisch sind.

Hoffentlich wird es möglich sein, über diesen interessanten Fund noch genauere Angaben zu erhalten.

It was found by a factory worker in the Braun iron foundry

LEFT: Gurlt's discovery is mentioned in the *Naturwissenschaftliche Rundschau* of 11 Dec 1886.

The Cube is also mentioned by all the early ancient-astronaut supporters – Kolosimo, Charroux, and later Michael Baigent.[2] All just repeat the few excerpts from contemporary accounts that Fort already quotes.

The technical literature lists the Salzburg Cube as "Wolfsegg iron". It was found by a worker in the Braun iron foundry in Schondorf when he broke up a lump of lignite (or brown coal) that had been mined at Wolfsegg. The man who introduced the find into the literature, Bonn physicist Friedrich Adolf Gurlt, thought it was a fossil meteorite. That made it quite a sensation at the time. In contrast to many modern authors, Fort luckily gives his sources (which themselves were translations from the German), and so I could follow the career of this strange find.

In 1886, the *Naturwissenschaftliche Rundschau*[3] summarised Gurlt's theses in an abstract: "Gurlt: Discovery of a meteorite in Tertiary brown coal. In a block of Tertiary lignite from Wolfsegg a very important discovery has been made at the very moment a worker smashed same to burn it. A meteorite was discovered inside, whose shape corresponds to that of a right-angled parallelopiped with strongly rounded edges. Its dimensions are 67mm, 62mm, and 47mm, and its weight 785g. The whole surface is covered with the finger-like depressions

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ABOVE LEFT: The Salzburg Cube. **ABOVE RIGHT**: The much-debated specimen can be found in the Heimathaus Museum in Vöcklabruck. **BELOW**: Dr Aristides Brezina.

peculiar to meteorites; a layer of magnetic oxide which covers it is finely wrinkled. The iron contains compound carbon and some nickel, but a quantitative analysis has not yet been carried out." Although geometrical terms are used to describe the form, the measures already indicated mean that the object cannot have been a perfect cube!

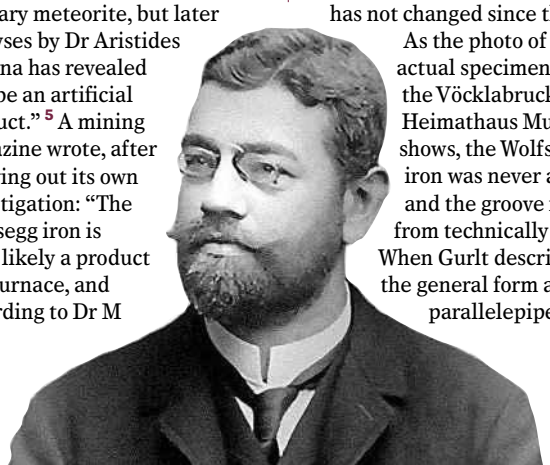
In 1892, the *Die Fortschritte der Physik* [4] still regarded the Cube as a meteorite, but noted that one characteristic of iron meteorites was missing: "A piece of meteoritic iron was discovered in a lump of lignite from Wolfsegg when this was smashed. The piece has the dimensions of 67mm, 62mm, 47mm and weighed 785g. The iron showed fingerprints, contained carbon, nickel, but showed no Widmanstätten pattern. Mr Daubrée has some notes on lignite mines and stresses how important this find is, as previously not a single meteorite has been encountered in these strata."

However, despite these misgivings, Gurlt's identification of the metal object as a meteorite was not questioned by anyone for quite some time. In 1888, the Vienna mineralogist and meteor expert Dr Aristides Brezina (1848-1909) carried out an investigation on behalf of the Bergmannstag (miner's assembly) and published his results in a six-page text (*Ueber das Eisen von Wolfsegg*, Verlag des Comité's des Bergmannstag, 1888). He concluded that the iron was not meteoric after all, but artificial and man-made, and was the product of iron smelting. It also was recent, not Tertiary.

After Brezina, other experts had a closer look, and the story quickly changed. Much, it now appeared, had been pure imagination on the part of Dr Gurlt. It seems that by 1908, it had become common knowledge that the Wolfsegg Iron or Salzburg Cube was simply a piece of slag – a by-product of metallurgy. The science magazine *Gaea* pointed out that the iron had not been found in isolation, but as a part of a large deposit. "The Wolfsegg iron had been taken for a Tertiary meteorite, but later analyses by Dr Aristides Brezina has revealed it to be an artificial product." [5] A mining magazine wrote, after carrying out its own investigation: "The Wolfsegg iron is most likely a product of a furnace, and according to Dr M Mach an artefact of a doubtful historical period." [6]

I am not the first to find this out. As Canadian fortean Mr X explains in a note to his cyber text edition of Fort's first book: "The object was believed by Adolf Gurlt, a mining engineer, to be a fossil meteorite; however, the object had no Widmanstattan pattern, and it contained no nickel, chromium, nor cobalt. The 'Wolfsegg Iron' was believed, by R Grill of the Geologische Bundesanstalt in Vienna, to be a piece of cast iron, which was found among pieces of coal at an iron foundry and which may have been 'used as ballast with primitive mining machinery'." [7] That brings to three – Brezina, Mach and Grill – the total number of specialists who determined that the Cube was nothing more than a piece of slag. Common scientific opinion on the identity of the specimen has not changed since then.

As the photo of the actual specimen in the Vöcklabruck Heimathaus Museum shows, the Wolfsegg iron was never a cube, and the groove is far from technically perfect. When Gurlt described the general form as a parallelepiped (a three-dimensional figure formed by six parallelograms) he obviously never intended to imply a precise, abstract body, but it was so taken by Fort, and after him repeated by many others. Fort could only speculate as to whether it was an alien artefact or the remains of a lost civilisation from our most distant past. But it is not. However, I am sure it will resurface in some fortean potboiler sooner or later, described once more as a perfectly machined cube bearing an equally precise and mysterious groove.



NOTES

1 Charles Fort, *Complete Books*, New York, Dover, 1974, p130.

2 See Peter Kolosimo, *Not of this World*, London, Sphere, 1971, p15; Michael Baigent, *Das Rätsel der Sphinx*, Munich, Knaur 1998, S. 26

3 *Naturwissenschaftliche Rundschau*, vol 1, 1886, p 449.

4 *Die Fortschritte der Physik*, Band 42, Teil 3, p191.

5 *Gaea, Natur und Leben*, Band 44, 1908, p166.

6 *Oesterreichische Zeitschrift für Berg- und Hüttenwesen*, Band 58, 1910, p328.

7 www.resologist.net/damn09.htm

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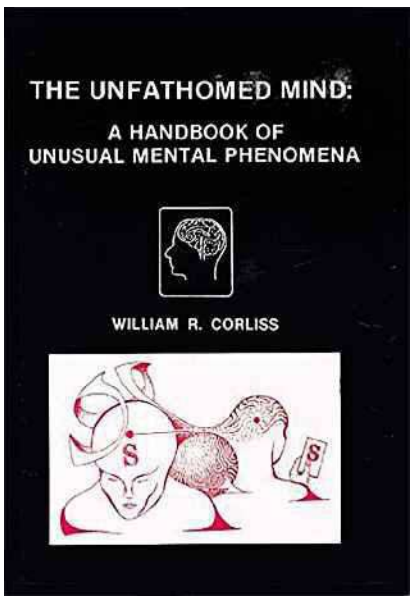
36. SOURCEBOOK SYNECDOCHE

The Sourcebook Project was one of a number of series, or sets, of over 30 sourcebooks and handbooks on sundry scientific anomalies gathered together by William R Corliss (1926–2011); the first, on strange artefacts of ancient man, was published in 1974, the last, on ancient graphic artefacts, in 2005. In between came volumes on biological, geological, meteorological and more archæological oddities and mysteries. These were put together alongside Corliss's other, commissioned scientific writing, which embraced such glitzy titles as *Wind Tunnels of NASA*. For the sourcebooks and handbooks, Corliss actually wrote very little: they were overwhelmingly compilations of notes and papers from the peer-reviewed scientific literature on queer and quirky stuff that took Corliss's fancy. He said he was inspired by the work of Charles Fort, but his harvests of material are most un-fortean – there's nothing from the popular prints, and none of Fort's weird wit and capricious darts into the philosophical fringes. All good solid stuff for all that, even if some critics fairly noted that some things that Corliss presented as mysterious did have reasonable explanations. It would be fatuous to attempt to examine such a vast collection in one article, so we hereby commit synecdoche, letting one volume stand for all. In fact, it's an unusual one for Corliss, who in only one other book touched on the mysteries of the mind. But for that reason, it's in many ways probably the most fortean of the lot.

The Unfathomed Mind contains over 400 articles over 748 pages, sorted into five chapters – 'Dissociative Behavior', 'The Possible Acquisition of Hidden Knowledge', 'Anomalous Modes of Information Processing', 'Hallucinations', 'Remarkable Mind-Body Interactions', and 'Mind Over Matter'. Each has its own detailed contents list.

The last occupies a mere 14 pages, which seems a bit less than telekinesis/psychokinesis deserves. Corliss almost, but not quite, conflates poltergeist activity with PK, and not without reason. His first selection in this last chapter is a 1911 paper on poltergeists; others deal with mysterious self-ringing doorbells (though no mind is identified as the disturber of the matter) and there is an unintentionally amusing account of odd goings-on from Martin Luther (he of the Diet of Worms, one of history's great costives, and rabid anti-semite), no less. When in prison, Luther thought a bag of nuts he'd been given were "bouncing about in the sack, and knocking violently against each [*sic*] other [and] came to the side of my bed to make noises at me. However this did not harm me, and I went to sleep. By and by I was awakened by a great noise on the stairs, which sounded as though somebody was tumbling down

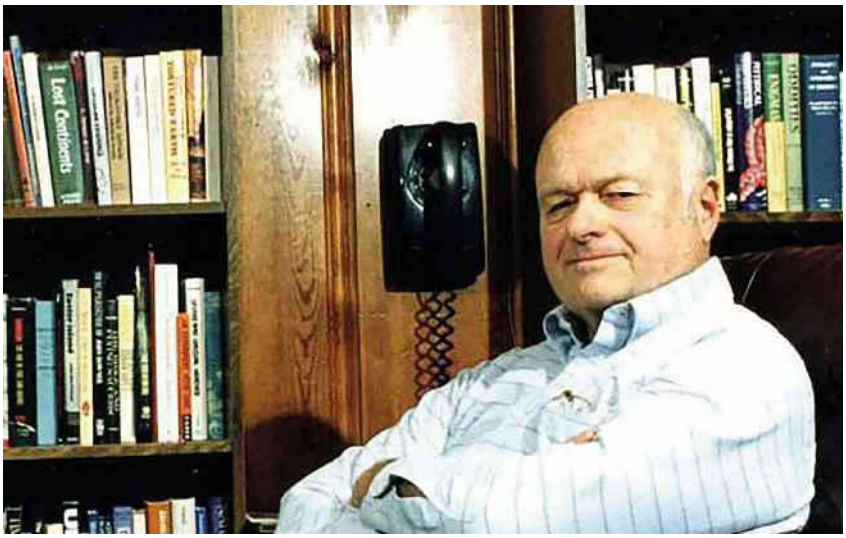


them a hundred barrels…." (see **FT293:38-41** for more on Luther and his polts). Safe in the comfort of his convictions, Luther put all this down to the pranks of Old Nick, so we are left none the wiser, really, about either poltergeists or PK. After all, you can blame the Devil for just about anything. But here is an aspect of poltish activity that as far as we know investigators have never explored (and who can blame them): not altogether idly, one wonders if there is any correlation between chronic constipation, or other nasty gut problem, and spontaneous PK. Good luck to anyone applying for the grant.

Given the amount of kerfuffle about PK going on among psychical researchers at the time Corliss was compiling this book, the relative paucity of material here is perhaps a sign of caution. He does reproduce a report on Prof Robert G Jahn's investigations into PK, which were inspired by a graduate student, and piqued his interest in the subject so much that he set up the Princeton Engineering Anomalies Research group in 1979 which, in due course, came in for hefty criticism of its experimental designs. More interesting, on the whole, are passing mentions of PK. In a piece exploring whether or not it was possible to predict the outcome of throws of coins in questioning the *I Ching*, the author soberly points out that a correct result *could* be the result of PK influencing the outcome, precognition, or "skilful throwing (perhaps involving a psi-controlled motor automatism)." This rather well illustrates the swamp one enters when trying to test ESP, since any aspect of psi can theoretically be at work. But isn't it playing with fire, just a bit, to try to divine anything to do with a book like the *I Ching*? We've had some interesting responses from it ourselves, but perhaps the most telling was the occasion on which the resulting hexagram was so obscure that it wasn't helpful, even to the most subjective imagination. So we tried again. Same result. And again, to no avail. The fourth attempt produced something along the lines of "You have already asked this question three times, stop taking the piss", albeit more elegantly expressed. So, not a book to be messed with.

Corliss's caution perhaps stemmed from a commitment to being fair. He reproduces Puthoff and Targ's (in)famous paper on remote viewing published in *Nature* in 1974, but precedes it with the journal's own careful (and itself fair) appraisal of both the research and its

own role, noting: "Publishing in a scientific journal is not a process of receiving a seal of approval from the establishment; rather, it is the serving of notice on the community that there is something worthy of their attention and scrutiny." This comes after an enumeration of the flaws *Nature*'s referees found in the piece (notably its vagueness) and a useful demolition of the more exaggerated claims made about it before publication. (For anyone wondering, this was written a year or so before the unlovable John Maddox, would-be incendiary of Rupert Sheldrake and all his works (see **FT353:52-53**), returned to the helm at *Nature*.)



Similarly weighed in the balance are (for example) reports of and investigations into 'fingertip reading', fancily known as 'dermo-optical perception'. Corliss reprints exchanges between proponents and Martin Gardner (which we briefly mentioned; see **FT365:56-57**). Corliss gives the last word to the proponents, which wasn't just a matter of timing, unlike the Jahn/PEAR saga, since the exchange took place in the 1960s. It's at such a point that one would like to have just a bit more editorial intervention, some indication of Corliss's own thoughts on the matter – he must have had an opinion, after all. Or so one supposes. Even an expression of baffled neutrality is an opinion, just as a declaration of having no morality remains a moral position. On the other hand, he subtly or surreptitiously lets slip his opinions by where he places things. Some discussions of UFOs, for instance, are parked in the chapter on hallucinations. The point is well taken, some of the time. As when it's Colin Bord (sometime of this parish, and blessed be he) discussing angels, flying saucers, and Joseph Smith, in a fine article from *Flying Saucer Review* in 1972. Less so when it's Bert Schwartz in *Medical Times* in 1968 presenting four close encounters as objectively real – but we get only his abstract, not the four cases in question, so we can't judge if they *may* be objectively real or not, or if the article even belongs in a chapter on hallucinations. This really isn't helpful, and certainly wasn't in pre-Internet days.

We may presume however that Corliss had a sense of humour, of a kind. He includes three articles on what's politely called 'breast augmentation' achieved using hypnosis. The 20-year-old patient in the first of these was clearly deeply troubled: a serial failure in college exams, deeply religious, but with a severe puritan streak that made her loathe her own body, she had got engaged to a 47-year-old alcoholic doley because, she said, with no bosom to speak of "she was entitled to no more". Two years after just one hypnotherapy session, she had dumped the alkie and got engaged to a young man about her own age, had passed the college courses she'd previously failed, made new friends, was reading through *The Song of Solomon* once a week – and her breasts had grown larger (her sister stood as additional witness). As the writer put it, if her original condition had been a psychosomatic illness, her renewed self was an instance of psychosomatic good health. The other instances of breast enlargement through hypnotherapy that Corliss prints may qualify the reflection that some women simply develop rather later than others.

> "IF YOU ONLY READ THE BOOKS THAT EVERYONE ELSE IS READING, YOU CAN ONLY THINK WHAT EVERYONE ELSE IS THINKING."
>
> *Haruki Murakami*

One of the more intriguing and varied of 'unusual mental phenomena' that affects a portion of otherwise perfectly standard-issue minds is synæsthesia. It may take a mild form, as in MCO's case reported by Thomas Hart in 1909: she saw Monday as green, Tuesday as red, Wednesday and Sunday as purple, but had no colour associations with Thursday and Saturday. Our own habit of a lifetime is to see these last two as bright orange and brown, respectively; Sunday is silvery white, Monday a bright overcast-sky white, Tuesday yellow, Wednesday a dull brownish dried-blood red, and Friday brick-red. There's no consistency, in short, among synæsthetes as to their colour associations, so whatever is going on is idiosyncratic and individualistic. We ourselves were astonished to discover that there are people (maybe the majority?) who do not 'see' music when they listen to it. But such things aren't even consistent within the individual. Corliss gives us the case of a three-and-a-half-year-old child who 'saw' the E above top C on the guitar as white, while on the piano, the same note was blue. But this vividness extended only within a certain range: beyond it, low notes were all black, and above it, all white. Yet more intriguingly, Corliss reprints a paper on two Wellesley College students who perceived music as three-dimensional shapes. One saw the flute as an acorn cup, or thimble; the other as a hollow tube. For the first, the piano appeared as rectangular blocks; the second saw spheres. One wonders how the child, and these two students, perceived chords or ensemble/orchestral music. These curious attributes may, one supposes, contribute to developing a sense of pitch and timbre among the gifted, but sheer curiosity demands more information and research. And incidentally, it doesn't work the other way round: seeing a red-brick wall doesn't conjure up notions of Friday, whatever they may be.

This has been but a dip of the toe into a very large pond, and Corliss's collection is itself no more than that. Plenty of food here for thought and further research, and as stimulus as well as a repository of curious facts, *The Unfathomed Mind* is highly commended. You can also read about angels, human calendar calculators, the *couvade*, *déja vu*, the need for dreams, genius, the effect of the Moon, vampirism, stigmata, and all kinds of other weird stuff. Get thee to a library!

William R Corliss, *The Unfathomed Mind: A handbook of unusual mental phenomena*, The Sourcebook Project, 1982

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Exploring subjective realities

The author of this study of the charlatan, megalomaniac, carpet salesman and occult thinker Gurdjieff claims his ideas mix gnosticism and rehashed Masonry, which may irritate the true believers

Deconstructing Gurdjieff

Biography of a Spiritual Magician

Tobias Churton

Inner Traditions 2017

Hb, 368pp, ISBN 9781620556382

"You are trapped within your own subjectivity, a mere automaton of the senses, a machine. Only by practising 'the Work' will you be able to transcend these limitations of consciousness and awaken." So declared G I Gurdjieff (1873–1949), variously described as a charlatan, megalomaniac and Oriental rug salesman, who remains among the most important – and controversial – Western spiritual leaders of the 20th century. Tobias Churton, author of *Aleister Crowley: The Beast in Berlin* and *Occult Paris*, argues that for all Gurdjieff's occult and esoteric roots, his ideas are largely a patchwork of Gnosticism and reconstituted Masonry, a bold claim that will rankle Gurdjieff's admirers.

Despite Churton's best efforts, solid historical evidence is in short supply. *Deconstructing Gurdjieff*, like preceding biographies, depends on interpretation and speculation. Little is known of Gurdjieff's background; he provides most of the information about his early years, but given his self-mythologising, its veracity is questionable. Raised in the multi-ethnic, religiously syncretic Turkish region of Kars, Gurdjieff was introduced to different cultures and religious ideologies, in particular that of the Yazidis, whose beliefs are a mélange of Zoroastrian, Christian, Islamic and Judaic. This range of influences led Gurdjieff to question dogmatic beliefs. He later claimed that his education involved travels to Tibet, India, Egypt, Iran, Rome and other places where he encountered "seekers of truth" – dervishes, fakirs and the remnants of the Essenes tribe in a Sarmoung monastery. Most scholars consider his account of these travels, *Meetings with Remarkable Men* (1927), complete with a map of a 'pre-sand' Egypt, to be largely fiction.

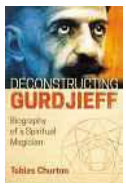
Returning to Moscow in 1912, Gurdjieff collected the first of his students, many of whom were intellectual and artistic. He had artistic tendencies, particularly toward music, literature and dance – though he viewed art purely as a means of achieving truth. His allegorical ballet, *The Struggle of the Magicians* (1914–1919), an "accurate picture of Oriental magic" set in India, anticipated his later philosophical texts. An advertisement in *The Voice of Moscow* for the 'Hindu'-authored ballet attracted the attention of one of its editors, the philosopher, author and seeker P D Ouspensky, who became Gurdjieff's most important pupil and collaborator, and wrote *In Search of the Miraculous* (1949), the most authoritative introduction to Gurdjieff's ideas. At his urging, Gurdjieff concretised his complex and eccentric system. According to Gurdjieff, a human consists of three 'centres': mind, body and emotions. Imbalance occurs when one is cultivated to the detriment of the others. The paths to enlightenment of the monk, yogi and fakir demanded that the practitioner reject modern life. Gurdjieff's (or rather Ouspensky's) 'Fourth Way', allowed seekers of spiritual enlightenment to do so without

"You are trapped within your own subjectivity, a mere automaton of the senses"

abandoning their lifestyles. 'The Work', would create balance and awaken one from the sleep that resulted from the limitations they imposed.

This system held more appeal for the intellectual Ouspensky, and his disagreement with Gurdjieff over its importance to 'the Work' contributed to their eventual split. Ouspensky based his own group on the 'Fourth Way'. Without his influence, Gurdjieff's philosophy and teachings tended toward the extreme – in 1921 he established the Institute for the Harmonious Development of Man near Paris. His method involved conscious attention to the self, which often depended on physical activity. He collaborated with composer Thomas de Hartmann on music for sacred dances intended to increase awareness of the interconnectedness of the centres. He instituted 'stop' exercises in which students were instructed to freeze in place so as to perceive their inner state at that moment. Gurdjieff often alternated kindnesses and cruelties, attention and ignorance in order, he claimed, to keep his students from regressing into a "waking sleep".

In this sense (coupled with his grandiosity, demands for obedience, rigidity, aloofness and charm), the charismatic Gurdjieff exhibited qualities often associated with cult leaders. His intellectually gifted followers included Ouspensky, de Hartmann, Jane Heap, Jeanne de Salzmann, Maurice Nicoll, John G Bennet and A R Orage. As a result, the literature – lectures, essays, manuscripts, exegesis and memoirs – is considerable. 'The Work' (influential because, Churton contends, of its being vaguely defined) legitimised its practice. Gurdjieff's emphasis on stoic introspection and self-examination appealed to students during the 20th century, when Eastern and ancient philosophies began to be (re-) introduced into popular Western culture. His borrowings from occult literature, esotericism, Vedism, and Pythagoreanism – particularly in his *enneagram* and belief in a harmonious, vibratory structure to the Universe – hold a similar appeal.



In 1924, Gurdjieff began his own contribution to the literature, beginning with *The Herald of the Coming Good* (1933), which outlined what was to be his *magnum opus*, the intentionally grandiosely entitled *All and Everything*. The first part was the deliberately obscure *Beelzebub's Tales to His Grandson*, among the strangest works of 20th century occult literature – written, Gurdjieff explained, so as to *demand* the reader's attention. The novel consists of reflections on the history of the human race by an extraterrestrial to his grandson, recounted during their return to their home planet. From 1927 to 1935, Gurdjieff completed the second and third parts, *Meetings with Remarkable Men* and *Life is Real Only Then, When 'I Am'*, which were published posthumously in versions edited and translated by his followers.

Mothership connection

UFO beliefs – from Clinton's funk-importing star child to Patti Smith's alien abduction preoccupation – were a thread running 1970s music

Strange Stars

David Bowie, Pop Music, and the Decade Sci-Fi Exploded

Jason Heller

Melville House 2018

Hb, 302pp, notes, discography, ind, £20.00, ISBN 9781612196978

Stanley Kubrick's 1968 *2001: A Space Odyssey,* which anticipated contact with intellectually superior aliens and, a year later, the Moon landing, excited a generation who had lived through the Space Race and been bombarded by sci-fi TV shows, films and books.

David Bowie's *Space Oddity*, which conveniently coincided with the landing, plays on Kubrick's film title and tells the saga of Major Tom, who is lost in space. Heller uses Bowie as the touchstone for his exploration of how sci-fi influenced pop genres throughout the 1970s. Bowie embraced it in his songs and in his Ziggy Stardust persona, culminating in 1980 with *Ashes to Ashes* and a return to the plight of Major Tom.

There had been novelty songs about flying saucers, but in this period they attained prominence in mainstream music. Showing Bowie was not alone in his 'tin can'. The Moody Blues's 'To Our Children's Children's Children' released after *Space Oddity*, was the first fully realised sci-fi concept album and sees us as a future spacefaring species.

From progressive rock, metal, funk, jazz, reggae, disco, glam rock, krautrock right through to punk and the New Romantics, musicians used sci-fi to indulge all manner of fantasies and viewpoints. Many just jumped on the extraterrestrial bandwagon, but others like Bowie had a serious interest. As Heller shows, authors like George Orwell, Arthur C Clarke, Philip K Dick and Ray Bradbury influenced many songwriters. There was also a cross fertilisation between literature and music; sci-fi author Michael Moorcock collaborated with space rockers Hawkwind on their 1975 *Warrior on the Edge of Time* album, and he included the band in his 1971 novel *A Cure for Cancer*.

Actual UFO experiences and beliefs became a part of the personal and professional mythology of pop stars. Bowie in his Ziggy Stardust phase regarded himself as one of the 'Light People', akin to Leonardo, Galileo, Newton, Dylan and Hendrix. Like them, he was here to advance technology and culture.

Patti Smith also had a preoccupation with aliens; Heller regards her song 'Birdland' as "one of the most arresting and hallucinatory accounts of alien abduction ever set to music". After the arrival of a UFO, the lyrics continue: "And the ship slides open, and I go inside of it, where I am not human".

George Clinton and Parliament's album *Mothership Connection* takes the viewpoint of a Star Child who is here to liberate humanity and give it the funk we need. It refers to Clinton's experience of being splattered by silvery droplets that rained from metallic grey clouds as he stood on the deck of a fishing boat in the Bermuda Triangle. His bandmate Bootsy Collins shouted that the "space limousine" was going to take them to the 'Mothership'. They ripped off their shirts and danced in the silver rain, expecting to be abducted at any moment. No abduction happened, the storm blew over and they steered a course back to harbour and reality as the influence of the LSD faded. Another version is that he and Bootsy were in a car when a beam of light from a UFO hit them, and they arrived home to discover that half the day had disappeared from their memory.

Sun Ra (born Herman Poole Blount) had an equally shaky relationship with fact and fiction. In 1936 he was surrounded by a bright light that turned him into a form of energy that allowed him to be transported to Saturn, where he met aliens with antennæ on each ear and over each eye. They told him to drop out of college because the world was going to be in chaos and he needed to speak to the world through his music. Like George Clinton, he told various versions of this story and it is possible it occurred (if at all) at a much later date. Whatever the facts, he helped ignite Afrofuturist sci-fi and lectured at the University of California, where he told his students that: "This planet is vulnerable to any kind of creature... Anything can come on the planet and grab one of your brothers and take him to the Moon, Jupiter, anywhere..."

The possibilities opened up by space exploration, technology and alien contact hit new heights in 1977 with the release of *Star Wars* and *Close Encounters of the Third Kind*. As Heller notes, they blasted open the floodgates of sci-fi music.

Heller details how the influence of sci-fi evolved through different musical genres in the 1970s, and neatly shows the incredible flux between different media that (rocket) powered us into the 1980s.

To help us on our way, Heller provides a detailed discography, making it a good starting point for exploring these fantastic audio adventures and contemplating how UFO encounters (imagined or not) have infiltrated all aspects of popular culture.

Nigel Watson

★★★★☆

For Churton, these works are "filled with pseudo-objectivity... and arch pretentiousness" and, unsurprisingly, not to be trusted as biographical sources. Their value, he argues, lies in what they tell us about Gurdjieff.

Churton's intention appears to be a simple interrogation of Gurdjieff's ideas and practices, with the aim of reducing Gurdjieffian thought and the appeal of 'the Work' to a cult of personality and mere manipulation. He suggests these esoteric writings derive principally from Masonic sources (indeed, he argues that the "seekers of truth" mentioned in *Meetings* may be a Masonic Lodge and his three centres is based on the Masonic "rule of three"). Such derivations are not beyond the realm of possibility. Gurdjieff maintained only generalised derivations from ancient philosophy, primarily Sufism and Yezidism.

In many ways, Gurdjieff, the personality and teacher, defies easy categorisation demanded by biography, especially the thematically limited variety engaged in by Churton. There is value here in grappling with the historical record, yet what is most interesting about Gurdjieff is the method, and not the alleged madness.

Eric Hoffman

★★★★☆

Megalith

Studies in Stone

Hugh Newman et al

Wooden Books 2018

Hb, 416pp, illus, £16.99, ISBN 9781907155277

This is a compendium of seven previously published titles from Wooden Books, plus 20 of Alexander Thom's stone circle surveys. If you've already got the individual books on your shelf you may be tempted to skip this collection, but that would be a mistake. The index spans the volume and is a useful cross-reference, plus the format is a little larger than that of the originals.

The snappy gazetteer approach of Hugh Newman's *Stone Circles* leads you in with a tour of megalithic sites around the world from Göbekli Tepe through the UK, Europe and on to the Far East and Australia. Newman gives the reader enough background

to the history and theories to make sense of the rest. Howard Crowhurst's *Carnac* follows, then Robin Heath's *Stonehenge*, Evelyn Francis's *Avebury*, Gordon Strong's *Stanton Drew*, Gerald Poynting's *Callanish* and Chris Mansell's *Ancient British Rock Art*. Alexander Thom's surveys of stone circles comprise the final section.

Taken as a whole, what emerges is an emphasis on the ideas that ancient people carried out accurate surveys over long distances, could move enormous weights with apparent ease, were obsessed with encoding the rhythms and movements of the Sun, Moon and Sky, and wanted to communicate their understanding down the ages.

The ideas around surveying and communication are what conventional academics often find hard to swallow. Suggesting that these societies had an accurate understanding of the subtle movements of the Moon tends to put them in a tizz.

By the time you're talking about a unified system of metrology that encodes the dimensions of the Earth and has neatly married the solar and lunar calendars with longer terms cycles such as the Saros, Metonic and Draconic… well, you can almost hear the howls of outrage from a range of disciplines.

The trouble is that this does all hang together in a strange "surely that's more than a coincidence?" way, and you start to think that maybe the authors are on to something.

If I were to quibble about this book, I'd do so on two fronts.

First, a lack of footnotes makes it difficult to follow up a number of instances where, apparently, "recent research has shown…". An overuse of footnotes can be as annoying as a lack of them, but one or two here and there would really help the interested reader.

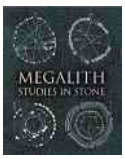
Secondly, there are a small number of places where the information is incorrect or out of date. For instance, the sarsens of Lockeridge weren't dropped from glaciers in 10,000 BC but are silicified sandstone boulders, the remains of eroded tertiary sediments that formed *in situ* atop the chalk more than 50 million years ago.

Another example is the aside in the Stanton Drew section that suggests Woodhenge was a roofed roundhouse. The absence of a surrounding drip-line trench in the chalk at this site firmly killed that idea over 10 years ago during the work of the Stonehenge Riverside Project.

It's inevitable in a compendium of works stretching from 2007 to 2018 that some things will now be out of date, and that's forgivable. The problem with the factual errors is that readers who have pre-existing knowledge of the topic, or a drive to cross-check assertions, may end up rejecting – perhaps unfairly – the entire argument as a result.

All that said, some remarkable work is being presented in this collection and the astronomical and geometrical insight on display is astonishing; not just that of the original builders of the monuments, but of those who believe they have rediscovered the plan.

Howard Crowhurst's entry on Carnac is a particular tour de force in this respect, as is Robin Heath's Stonehenge, and you'll need to channel Euclid, Pythagoras, John Michell and Alexander Thom to fully grasp the implications.



After the intensity of some of the earlier sections, Chris Mansell's *Ancient British Rock Art* is a gentle meander through the world of cup and rings, spirals, lozenges and stars in the company of an artist who has no specific theory to push. It's the perfect way to round off the volume. A fine addition to any megalithomaniac's library.

Simon Banton

★★★★☆

Death in the Garden

Poisonous Plants and Their Use Throughout History

Michael Brown

White Owl 2018

Pb, 200pp, illus, £16.99, ISBN 9781526708380

Slightly eccentric, a little unfocused in its selection criteria, and not brilliantly proofread, this book about herbalism, poisonous plants, and plants that are sometimes poisonous, is nonetheless enthusiastically recommended to anyone who enjoys anecdotes from the odder nooks of science and history. In other words, it's the kind of book that *FT* readers read bits out from.

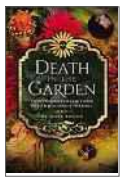
For instance, there's the writer from some previous century (annoyingly, many of Brown's quotations are unattributed) who suggests that adding Cuckoo Pint roots to salad "makes excellent sport with a sawcy sparkling guest, and drives him from overmuch boldness." The unwelcome visitor won't be bothering you much longer, because soon "he shall not be able to eat any more, nor scarce speak for pain."

Black Hellebore was used both as a "micing powder" (to kill rodents) and as a cure when "a man or beast pisse blood." Did it work on blood-pissing mice, I wonder? More recently, says Brown, Woolworths stopped selling Morning Glory seeds in the 1970s because hippies were said to be using them as a substitute for LSD.

The most cheering story is that of the rebel kids of Nassington village, Northamptonshire, who in 1895 used the effects of a poisonous weed to get them a few days off school – unwittingly creating a plague panic in the process. Poisonous plants have their uses, and this book has its delights.

Mat Coward

★★★★☆



The Great Silence

Science and Philosophy of Fermi's Paradox

Milan M Cirkovic

Oxford University Press 2018

Hb, xxviii + 396pp, illus, notes, refs, ind, £25, ISBN 9780199646302

Enrico Fermi spent most of his career thinking about nuclear physics, not extraterrestrials. His only recorded contribution to the latter subject, during a lunchtime conversation in 1950, took the form of a three-word question: "Where is everybody?" It's a question with such huge ramifications that it's been given a name: Fermi's Paradox.

Given the enormous size and age of the Universe, and the basic Copernican principle that there's nothing special about planet Earth, space should be teeming with aliens. Yet we see no evidence of them.

Of course, Fermi's paradox isn't a paradox for everyone. To a hardened sceptic, it's not at all obvious that "space should be teeming with aliens", while few ufologists would go along with the suggestion that "we see no evidence of them". For anyone who believes both statements to be true, however, Fermi's paradox constitutes one of the Universe's biggest mysteries. As Milan Cirkovic puts it in the introduction to this book, "it is the most complex multidisciplinary problem in contemporary science".

I wasn't sure I agreed with him on that – but by the end of chapter 3, he'd convinced me. The book then proceeds to a methodical review of the various hypotheses put forward to explain Fermi's paradox. Some of them are well known, such as the "zoo hypothesis" popular in science fiction, and various takes on the "rare Earth hypothesis" – that there's something intrinsically unique about our planet and/or species (including the biblical "special creation hypothesis').

Then there's the "transcension hypothesis" – that intelligent species evolve towards a post-biological form that's undetectable to us – and the "simulation hypothesis", that the physical Universe is just a computer-generated illusion.

The list goes on. I can't help mentioning a few more, just because I like the names he gives them: "Interstellar Containment", "Thoughtfood Exhaustion", "The Gigayear of Living Dangerously", "Introvert Big Brother" and "The Paranoid Style in Galactic Politics". He concludes the discussion with a kind of scorecard, awarding the highest rating (a cautious A minus) to a variant of the rare-Earth hypothesis that he calls the "Gaia Window".

This isn't a book for the unquestioning UFO believer or the die-hard sceptic. But if you're somewhere between, and you're genuinely baffled by Fermi's Paradox, then you ought to read this book.

Andrew May

★★★★★

Polymorphous godliness

This account of our ancient gods begs a few questions (did the Romans invent gods willy-nilly?) and raises a few hares (cannibalism for health?)

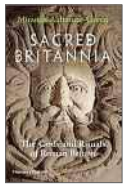
Sacred Britannia

The Gods and Rituals of Roman Britain

Miranda Aldhouse-Green

Thames & Hudson 2018

Hb, 256pp, bib, notes, illus, ind, £19.95, ISBN 9780500252222



Many say the only religion modern Brits have is the NHS. That represents drastic retrenchment from their polymorphous godly past. Miranda Aldhouse-Green (henceforth, MAG) distils and updates her score or so previous cognate volumes.

The eight-page bibliography excludes Internet sources, an omission redolent perhaps of academic snobbery. (I recommend *The Gods Of Roman Britain* site, which includes many deities absent from MAG, plus a useful appendix of Unknown Gods.) Eight pages of end-notes vary from source references to substantial amplifications. Various names and subjects are either left out of the index or incomplete. Græco-Roman authors are cited from English translations, sometimes outdated or (Robert Graves, especially) unreliable. There is some deficiency in MAG's classical touch, e.g. overlooking Catullus's poem on Atys's self-castration, to which she devotes a good five pages.

The prose is workwoman-like, very serious (but thankfully without jargon), with odd moments of levity, my favourite being "Vultures fast-tracking the chosen ones to the happy underworld".

There are 11 chapters, framed by Prologue and Epilogue. First, Britain seen through Roman eyes, literary and archæological. MAG rightly stresses interpretative dangers, especially coin hoards. She neatly combines both *a propos* the elusive King Togidubnus (variously spelled and identified). I don't see why Herodian's lurid account should be "unexpected" – just the standard barbarophobe clichés. Some missed chances, notably Horace on British xenophobia (did UKIP already exist?) and Procopius's belief that it was the island of dead souls (perhaps extended from Plutarch's report, also missed, that many doubted Britain's existence). As to Roman interest in Britain, Cicero's disappointment in its lack of gold is revealing, as is Tacitus's claim that they were lured by its oyster pearls.

Then come the omnipresent Druids, subject of two previous MAG volumes. She rightly ignores their modern epigones' obsessive Stonehenge antics, a connection going back to 17th-century antiquarian John Aubrey. Regarding their much-debated etymology, MAG opts for 'dru', Gallic word for wisdom, against the popular favourite taking it from Greek for oak tree. Classical sources associated Druids with practising in this arboreal setting magic, philosophy and human sacrifice. Burning victims alive in cages naturally evokes *The Wicker Man*. Regarding Pliny's idea that they cannibalised for health reasons, one may think of notorious cottager Tom Driberg's obsessive fellatio, believing spunk-ingestion good for him.

Space precludes the dissection of the remaining chapters which they deserve – it's to MAG's credit that I had 20 pages of notes and queries, here boiled down to observations general and particular.

It's significant that Tacitus's British survey (Agricola) doesn't mention local gods; compare his list of German foreign imports. Also that Cæsar's account of Druids relates to Gaul, not Britain. As to Roman adaptations and syncretisms, might these merely indicate simple politeness to local beliefs, or PR to curry favour? Or, did they, as MAG puts it, "Simply invent gods at need?" Another suggested invention is Boudicca/Boadicea, thought by some to be priestess of British war goddess Andraste. If so, then she's not buried at King's Cross Station (a popular fancy), and it scuppers Antonia Fraser's *Warrior Queens*, taking us from ancient Boudicca to our modern one – Mrs Thatcher, Conqueror of the Argies.

There might profitably have been some discussion of British contributions to Roman cultural life. Juvenal gibes at slick British lawyers, but no harvest of writers, as in (notably) Spain. Nor is there any mention of Pelagius (dismissed by Jerome as 'Scottish Porridge-Eater').

MAG rightly emphasises "We must speculate". I don't/won't follow her down some provocative tracks, e.g. 'gender-subverting sculptors'.

As Magnus Magnusson said, " Archæology is the science-fiction of the past." But, without speculation, historiography is stultified.

Kudos to MAG for the astonishing breadth and depth of her archæological knowledge and analyses. It's hard to think of a site or artefact she's missed. One congenial endorsement of her discussion of dogs used as religious therapy was provided by Paul Sieveking (**FT368:12**).

MAG's last sentence is a fitting finale: "Ancient Britannia was indeed a most sacred isle, as culturally diverse as it is today but, arguably, with a stronger spiritual pulse in its Romano-British past."

Barry Baldwin

★★★★★

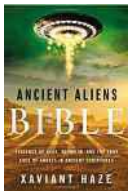
Ancient Aliens in the Bible

Evidence of UFOs, Nephilim, and the True Face of Angels in Ancient Scripture

Xaviant Haze

New Page Books 2018

Pb, 256p, illus, bib, indexes, $16.95, ISBN 9781632651150



Adding to what is a quite extensive canon of writings that examine religious scripture and the possibility of ancient alien contact, the exotically named Xaviant Haze covers familiar territory for the devotee of such discourse.

With the almost compulsory degree of suspicion towards established Christian religion and its suppression of the 'truth', Haze surveys such familiar avenues as the apocryphal gospels of Ezekiel, Zechariah, Isiah and Elijah; angels abroad upon the Earth; human genesis as a laboratory experiment; Sumerian death rays; and the alien origin of Jesus.

Illustrated throughout, *Ancient Aliens* is a good introduction to the field of 'alien contact theology' but somewhat laboured in parts, as the author insists on the inclusion of formidable scriptural citations to document quite basic assertions.

With the inclusion of chapters addressing Wikileaks, the Vatican's extraterrestrial agenda and the threat posed to Christianity by such a contestation, Haze pursues a path familiar to those raised on von Däniken and schooled in 'alternate' historical viewpoints.

Well documented and indexed, for my part *Ancient Aliens* covers the ground effectively but lacks the revelatory thrill and knowing authorship of *Chariot of the Gods* and other titles thrust upon humanity from the 1960s onwards.

Definitely a title for the reader with a passing interest in the subject but with restricted time to read, or indeed the 'completist' reader with a passion for alternative readings of scriptural history.

Chris Hill

★★★☆☆

ALSO RECEIVED

WE LEAF THROUGH A SMALL SELECTION OF THE DOZENS OF BOOKS THAT HAVE ARRIVED AT FORTEAN TOWERS IN RECENT MONTHS...

Bloke's Progress

An Introduction to the World of John Ruskin

Kevin Jackson and Hunt Emerson

Knockabout 2018

Pb, 120pp, illus, £12.99, ISBN 9780861662715

Hunt's award-winning surreal cartoon art has brightened *FT*'s pages since 1975.

He has migrated from pen and paper to digital techniques which allows far greater control over colouring. He and his writing partner Kevin Jackson have produced entertaining illustrated versions of classic literature and biographies, including *Lady Chatterley's Lover*, 'The Ancient Mariner', Dante's *Inferno*, Casanova's *Last Stand*, and highlights from the Book of Leviticus, as well as collections of his famous strips from *FT* and other publications. This album is an illustrated lecture (by Jackson) interpreting the work and ideas of the Victorian reformer-philosopher-philanthropist John Ruskin. Its three parts explain Ruskin's key topics: wealth, vision and labour.

Through scenes in the life of 'Darren Bloke', we see how lives can be ruined by a narrow, selfish interpretation of these philosophies, or made fruitful by their more 'mindful' employment; and this goes for individuals, businesses and society as a whole.

It's a great introduction to these ideas for adults but, more importantly, is simply brilliant for inspiring younger readers.

Through a Glass Darkly

Sir Arthur Conan Doyle and the Quest to Solve the Greatest Mystery of All

Stefan Bechtel and Laurence Roy Baines

St Martin's Press 2017

Hb, 303pp, illus, notes, bib, ind, £19.99, ISBN 9781250076793

Despite pretending this is not a scholarly work, veteran journalists Bechtel and Stains provide a satisfying set of notes, bibliography and index; and their narrative races along like a thriller as they describe how the mind that created a famous detective tackled the mystery of life after death. Their story of Sir Arthur Conan Doyle begins with a fresh summary of the birth and rise of Spiritualism, which spread out from New York before crossing the Atlantic. This rise closely paralleled that of photography which, after the huge loss of life in WW1, led to the new industry of consoling spirit portraiture. Spiritualism also closely paralleled the emergence of the campaign for women's suffrage; two prominent Suffragettes wrote that it was "the only religious sect in the world that has recognized the equality of women." As detailed here, it also led to the establishment of the Society for Psychical Research (SPR). Conan Doyle's interest in paranormal phenomena began in 1885 (he was 26); he eventually joined the SPR in 1893. By the time he died in 1930, he had published many articles and books promoting psychical research, besides the literature for which he is more famous. Our authors lay it all out: Doyle's consolation in Spiritualism (he 'saw' his mother and nephew at a séance "as plainly as I ever saw them in life"); his curious relationships with Houdini and Harry Price; his role in the affair of the 'Cottingley fairies'; and even his claim to have heard his dead son's voice in a séance. The book closes with an account of a séance Price attended after Conan Doyle's death, in which the two engage in friendly banter.

The Jaynes Legacy

Shining New Light Through the Cracks of the Bicameral Mind

Laurence Wile

Imprint-Academic.com 2018

Pb, 231pp, notes, £14.95, ISBN 9780992808860

Julian Jaynes's 1976 study *The Origins of Consciousness in the Breakdown of the Bicameral Mind* challenged the orthodox idea that the evolution of human consciousness was a smooth, upward and continuous process. Richard Dawkins characterised it as "either complete rubbish or a work of consummate genius, nothing in between". Wile, a medical physicist who specialises in neurophysiology, re-examines Jaynes's ideas in the light of discoveries made during the intervening decades. Wile focuses upon Reissner's fibres, mysterious thread-like structures in the centre of the brain, which underwent an equally mysterious devolution some 100,000 years ago – a process which, he demonstrates, triggered consciousness.

While hallucinogens may have been involved in exploiting the process, Wile concluded, "something was missing." Cue detailed medical detective work on cerebral spinal fluid, the pineal gland and associated neurology and neurochemistry, mixed with poetic passages from Ein Sof, Kundalini and Swedenborgian texts. Wile shows how this process relates to hallucinatory experiences and why it may be responsible for the early explosion of myths and religions, as well as the practical discoveries of early science and technology. As if to confound the Dawkinses of this world, it seems that this neurological 'fall' and the advent of consciousness have been encoded within the magical, spiritual and mystical literature of many cultures. This discovery deserves serious study.

Ancient Alien Ancestors

Advanced Technologies That Terraformed Our World

Will Hart

Bear & Co 2017

PB, 376pp, illus, notes, bib, ind, $20.95, ISBN 9781591432531

Fort's proposition – that all things are interconnected (see his *Book of the Damned*) is all very philosophical in the Daoist and Ancient Greek sort of way. Here comes Will Hart (a "writer and photojournalist", so you'd expect him to have a handle on ancient history and exobiology, right?), who has found a way to connect life on Earth with the Great Pyramid. He calls it 'directed panspermia'; meaning that someone in a galaxy far, far away, deliberately sends a package of microbes to 'seed' a planet. This person, or race of beings, then waits millions of years to see the result. It would probably look much like an overgrown garden a year after you had flung, with careless abandon, seeds of bird-friendly plants (from the free packet stuck on the front of the unwanted gardening catalogue). After that lapse of time, would the hoped-for organism be even recognisable? What about the rights of the indigenous creatures? Anyway, Hart tightens up his thesis with sightings of UFOs by astronauts, alien abductions, ancient UFOs and cloning technology. (Gestures weakly) Voilà!

The Bodmin Booklet

Paranormal at Bodmin Jail

Tad Fordat

Januspublishing.co.uk 2016

Pb, £9.95, 30pp, plates, illus. ISBN 9781857568691

The grim granite block-houses of Bodmin's Jail have loomed over the Devon town since the late 1700s. Over time the jail has served as the Navy's Correction Centre (during which period it was the locus of more than 50 executions); a night club, a depot for various businesses; and as a home for the nation's treasures during both World Wars. Over time, too, it developed a reputation for being haunted; sightings range from eerie mists and wet footprints to full-body apparitions and countless film and digital photos. The author – whose narrative presence is as faint as the wisps in his tales – sums up the spirit of the place in poetry illustrated with photos. It's slight yet memorable; still, we could wish for more documentation on the events related.

A Call from Heaven

Personal Accounts of Deathbed Visits, Angelic Visions, and Crossings to the Other Side

Josie Varga

Watkins Media 2018

Pb, 189pp, notes, bib, ind, $15.99, ISBN 9781632650818

Once more we hear the cry: "What happens when we die?" This answer is a fresh anthology of cases, whose authenticity is vouched for by medical professionals. Varga provides a reasoned analysis before presenting over 40 cases selected by researchers of the subject (such as Dr Bruce Greyson, Penny Sartori and Dr Pamela Kircher).

SEND REVIEW DISCS TO: FORTEAN TIMES, PO BOX 71602, LONDON E17 0QD, UK.

The little things in life

The second titular outing for Marvel's reluctant hero finds him sharing equal billing with a winged woman of power in a frothy action-comedy that feels sub-atomic worlds away from *Infinity War*

Ant-Man and the Wasp

Dir Peyton Reed, US 2018
On UK release from 2 August

After the galaxy-shaking events of *Infinity War* there's something almost disconcertingly low-key about the opening of *Ant-Man and the Wasp*; we find Scott Lang (the ever-likeable Paul Rudd) playing with his young daughter Cassie (Abby Ryder Fortson), recreating some of Ant-Man's previous adventures in a surprisingly elaborate homemade set built of cardboard boxes. You could read the scene as playfully signalling the relationship of the *Ant-Man* films – small-scale in more ways than one – with their bigger (and bigger-budgeted) *Avengers* cousins, or simply as an entertaining reminder that family ties are at the heart of these stories. In fact, what might have been an overly cute bit of Heath Robinsonism has a perfect in-Universe function, too, explaining why we haven't seen Scott since the events of *Civil War*: he's spent the last two years under house arrest in San Francisco following the pro-Captain America stance he took in that film; so what else was he going to do – apart from learn card tricks and take up the drums?

The Wasp dodges butcher's knives, bullets and even a steak tenderiser

It's a neat bit of multipurpose writing, then, that gets us up to speed, emotionally involved and prepared for the sort of goofy adventures and amusing inventiveness that the film, like its predecessor, trades in. Before long, Scott has escaped his FBI minder (Randall Park, playing a comedic version of 1950s character Jimmy Woo) and teamed up once more with Hank Pym (a splendidly tetchy Michael Douglas) and his daughter Hope van Dyne (Evangeline Lilly), who are also on the run from the law (and, before long, from various baddies too). Hope – now suited up and taking on her mother's heroic mantle – proves more than just a sidekick to Scott's everyman hero, as evidenced early on in a spectacularly balletic fight in a hotel kitchen, where the incredible shrinking Wasp dodges butcher's knives, bullets and even the odd steak tenderiser.

As with the first film, there are some lovely set pieces in which small things become very big and big things become very small, as well as riotous car chases, McGuffins within McGuffins, endearing character moments and some very funny recurring gags. *Ant-Man and The Wasp* works best as an ensemble movie, with convincing chemistry between the three leads and sterling work from a large supporting cast (including the brilliant Michael Peña and Michelle Pfeiffer as the lost-in-the-Quantum-Realm Janet van Dyne). All in all, this is a refreshingly intimate and enjoyable affair after the serious stakes of *Black Panther* and *Infinity War*, and almost old-fashioned in its breezy acceptance of itself as a perfect bit of summer superhero fun.

David Sutton

★★★★☆

Beast

Dir Michael Pearce, UK 2017
Altitude, £10.99 (Blu-ray) £9.99 (DVD)

A serial killer is stalking Jersey and has just claimed his fourth victim. Moll (Jessie Buckley) is celebrating her birthday but the event is upstaged by her sister Polly (Shannon Tarbet) announcing that she is pregnant with twins. Moll heads off to a local disco, where a guy gets forceful with her after they leave. Pascal (Johnny Flynn) appears and frightens him off. Subsequently Moll provides Pascal – under suspicion from the police – with an alibi, saying that they had danced all night and left the club together.

Moll has shadows in her own past; when she was 13 she stabbed a school bully, resulting in her mother Hilary (Geraldine James) quitting her job to provide home schooling. Hilary uses this to control Moll, treating her more like a child than a 27-year-old adult. Moll is also expected to mind her niece and look after her Alzheimer's-stricken father. Given her toxic home environment, she is eager to seek adventure with the free-living Pascal, who hunts and works as a handyman, the antithesis of her upper-middle class family, who look down on the locals and show contempt for itinerant Portuguese crop-pickers.

Moll, in a voiceover, speaks of killer whales as she practises her smile in a mirror, reflecting on how they smash their teeth against tank walls in captivity as they try to escape. She persists in her escapades with Pascal, in spite of his past criminal record and growing suspicion falling on him.

There are many twists in this dark tale of insular island life, which is convincingly written and directed by Michael Pearce, making his feature film debut.

Páiric Ó Corráin

★★★★☆

Clash of the Titans

Dir Desmond Davis, US 1981
Warner Bros, £9.99 (Dual format)

Being the Ray Harryhausen stop-motion fantasy from 1981, rather than the 2010 CGI turkey. Almost everything Harryhausen put his hand to is fondly remembered by fans who grew up with his ingenious and beautiful model creations. Whenever you get into debates about the merits of CGI, his name inevitably comes up as an example of classic film-making in which even if the subject was fantastical, it had an element of the real and tangible. He is truly one of the legends of cinema, one of those select few whose name is synonymous with his field.

Whereas earlier films told of Jason or Sinbad, this one deals with Perseus (Harry Hamlin), favourite son of Zeus (Laurence Olivier), and his quest to save his beloved Andromeda (Judi Bowker) from the machinations of the gods. *Clash of the Titans* is the last film to which Harryhausen put his name and, truth be told, it's not his best; but it does nevertheless contain some memorable creations, particularly Calibos, the monstrously deformed son of Thetis, and the Medusa, a truly terrifying creature whom Perseus must overcome if he is to rescue his damsel in distress.

Despite some magical moments such as the taming of Pegasus, the film falls down because it strays too far from the model his best films employed. This is almost certainly because, by the early 1980s, what had been essentially simple fantasy films now had to compete with the likes of *Star Wars* – which meant bigger budgets, epic stories and all-star casts. This film certainly has the latter, though hardly any of them are given anything to do; Ursula Andress gets one line! Unfortunately, it also has a mechanical owl, a pretty desperate attempt to add an R2D2 character to Greek myth. Still, any Harryhausen is worth cherishing and this is no exception.

I must point out, though, that this Blu-ray transfer is patchy: at times the film looks better than it has ever done, but often the picture is almost unwatchably grainy; and the extras are perfunctory.

Daniel King

★★★☆☆

THE REVEREND'S REVIEW

FT's resident man of the cloth REVEREND PETER LAWS dons his dog collar and faces the flicks that Church forgot! (www.theflicksthatchurchforgot.com)

Doom Asylum

Dir Richard Friedman, US 1987
Arrow Video, £14.99 (Blu-ray)

The Case of the Scorpion's Tail

Dir Sergio Martino, Italy 1971
Arrow Video, £14.99 (Blu-ray)

The Last House on the Left

Dir Wes Craven, US 1972
Arrow Video, £14.99 (Blu-ray)

On-screen violence comes in many flavours, and this month Arrow Video serves up three distinct versions of brutality.

First on the menu is the comedy-death of *Doom Asylum* (1987), where a girl-punk band (plus assorted Eighties stereotypes) fight off a dead lawyer who somehow survived his autopsy. Despite his political wise-cracks, the killer doesn't really cut it as a horror icon – but at least he cuts up plenty of teenagers in gore sequences that are (mostly) impressive. The humour is very weird; take the girl who insists on calling her boyfriend 'Mom', then refuses to have sex with him because "that would be incest". Baffling. Setting the film entirely in one locale may have helped the budget, but it makes the film drag at times – made worse by the most blatant piece of film padding I've ever seen. Entire segments from *The Demon Barber of Fleet Street* (1936) are liberally, and frequently, included. That said, there are enough gonzo jokes, lively gore and Eighties radness to tickle most retro horror fans; but it's a patchy film all told. The picture quality is superb though. Tip: Arrow provide two versions, I suggest you try

You'll be left feeling disturbed and even violated

the 1:33 ratio. You get more information at the top and bottom of the frame, plus a few stray boom mikes.

Prefer your violence with less laughs and a peppering of style and class? Then try *The Case of the Scorpion's Tail* (1971) which offers a classic dish of *giallo* carnage. Ingredients include leather gloves, inventive photography and many a blade stuck in skin. It's a typically complex plot involving plane crashes, an heiress and a million-dollar inheritance (£400k in British pounds, as the film helpfully points out). I'm surprised Hollywood haven't remade more of these old Italian genre pieces – I reckon the twisty plots would go down well.

The final offering this month isn't classy at all and it certainly isn't fun, but it's still the most significant meal on the menu. *The Last House on the Left* (1972) sees two young women humiliated, tortured, murdered and then avenged by their parents. Nothing more than depraved exploitation? Plenty thought so. Yet this retelling of Ingmar Bergman's *The Virgin Spring* does wonders in showing the gravity of real-life violence. Modern folks, used to the shocks of extreme cinema, might find it all a bit tame, I suppose. But if you're anything like me, you'll be left feeling both disturbed and even a little violated. That might not sound like a fun night out at the cinema, but since when were movies only meant to entertain? Films can take violence and stylise it, like the *giallos* do, or spin it as grotesque comedy or parody, as we see in many vintage slashers. Yet sometimes films are at their most profound, when they keep the flavours plain and simple, presenting violence simply as it is: senseless, brutal and utterly depressing. I'm not surprised that the sensitive and intelligent Wes Craven used his directorial debut to remind us of that.

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INTERVIEW

SIMON MARSDEN: A LIFE IN PICTURES

The late Sir Simon Marsden's atmospheric and otherworldy images were an inspiration to Irish director Jason Figgis, who talked to FT about his new film celebrating the life and work of this unique British photographer

FT: What was your first encounter with Simon Marsden's work?

JF: In the early 1990s, a Dublin news agency called Eason was a place where you could go and read through the books while sitting in deep sofas and whiling away the hours. I first encountered Simon's books there. I couldn't afford to buy them at the time but I could afford the time to drink in every image and absorb every word. I was hooked on his work from that moment forward.

You later collaborated with him on the 2003 film *The Twilight Hour*. How did it come about?

I contacted Simon's agent and Simon was impressed by my letter so he decided to call me one evening. We immediately struck up a friendship based on our mutual interest in all things paranormal. I volunteered to do some research for him around a book he intended to work on called *The Twilight Hour* and I set up permissions for Simon to visit his chosen properties across Ireland. I then volunteered to accompany him, so that his job of recording the images was as hassle-free as possible. He later invited my then girlfriend Ann and I to visit him at his home in Lincolnshire and it was there that I suggested we film the adventure. And, after a little convincing, he agreed.

What was it like working with him? His photography seems to conjure up a certain sense of loneliness, but he was very good company by all accounts.

It was a wonderful experience. Simon was a fabulous travelling companion and I was fascinated to watch him set up each location for his camera. He loved cloud formations to be "just so" as the textures contributed greatly to the overall effect of his complicated printing process. We were greeted everywhere by very welcoming property owners who were more than happy to have him use their homes to create his fantastic images. Simon was naturally friendly and could hold you enthralled as he expounded on as many subjects as you'd care to shake a stick at. He was a wonderful conversationalist and had Ann and I in stitches on many occasions. Simon's broad, 6ft 3in stature and incredibly deep voice tended to mask the fact that below the surface there lurked a stand-up comedian!

THE MARSDEN ARCHIVE

What were the most memorable moments of the shoot? Did any particular locations impress you as being haunted or otherwordly?

Absolutely. Simon, Ann and I shared an experience at the vast derelict Palladian mansion, Woodlawn House, in Co. Galway. At the bottom of the cantilevered staircase, while Simon was setting up, we heard the distinct sound of a woman crying in the rooms above. We went to investigate but found nothing. On another occasion, while at Castle Leslie, Simon asked me to take a look through the lens, where I witnessed a strange light flitting about. Simon smiled and agreed that he had never experienced anything like it before. It wasn't visible to the naked eye – only through the lens.

He once said that he didn't set out to capture photographic evidence of ghosts, but he seems to have been a firm believer in the supernatural. How did this effect his work?

Yes, he was a believer, and had had experiences while photographing for his books. It is true that he wasn't interested in trying to convince people of the existence of the supernatural but was more interested in evoking this hidden realm – that he always felt was present and that, at the right moments, we can still connect with – through his work.

Did he ever talk about any of the unexplained phenomena or strange experiences he'd encountered?

In particular, he told me of one very strange experience at the Rollright Stones in Oxfordshire where he was literally thrown back by an invisible force as he took photos of the ancient stone circle. His camera was ripped from his hands with great force and he was hurled backwards to the ground. He later found his body to be covered with dark and painful bruises. He was genuinely shaken by this experience.

What do think were his main influences?

Mostly literary ones. Definitely the work of the great American writer Edgar Allan Poe and the father of the English ghost story, Montague Rhodes James, as well as Arthur Machen. He was fascinated by the atmosphere these great artists conjured in their work and wanted to achieve the same thing with images.

Why do you think infrared photography appealed to him? It was seen as something of a 'gimmick' or special effect when it was first introduced, but do you think the medium allowed him to create something other than conventional photographic work or to connect with a different level of 'reality'?

I think Simon was fascinated by the hidden textures that became evident with infrared when he printed his photographs. He worked on many versions of each image until he was satisfied with the final result. He was constantly striving for the best effect in each image, and infrared allowed him to find these unique and dramatic textures. It gives his work a cinematic and romantic quality.

His work seems absolutely to be that of a romantic, someone in flight from modernity, in search of something older and more mysterious. Did that inform his subjects or the way he worked?

THE MARSDEN ARCHIVE

Simon wasn't a fan of the modern world. He found the likes of Oxford Street on a Saturday afternoon far more frightening than spending a night alone in a deserted graveyard or at a reputedly haunted location. He soaked up the atmosphere of his chosen subjects. He derived genuine joy from visiting the crumbling ruins of once magnificent estates and revealing the layers of history that informed them. These were his experiences of the world that brought him both joy and satisfaction – personally and professionally.

Simon came from a privileged, titled background, growing up in rambling old haunted houses, such as Panton Hall and Thorpe Hall, in the Lincolnshire Wolds. Obviously, this influenced his subject matter; do you think that this background means his work is essentially conservative, harking back regretfully to a vanished order represented by decaying mansions and ruined castles? Or does it offer something more than that?

I believe Simon was a classicist, but certainly not interested in societal class structures. He was more influenced by his family's bohemian arts leanings than titles. He respected greatly the work that his grandfather [Sir John Denton Marsden] did in shipping for local and national economic interests and recognised that the title [Baronet of Grimsby] was bestowed as a direct reflection of his grandfather's achievements. Simon was a romantic, and a symptom of that romanticism was the subject matter of ghosts and their respective hauntings: in grand buildings and open moorland and perhaps even the small corners of a walled garden.

What did he believe photography – or at least his photography – was for?

To capture that special layer of mystery that is not apparent to the naked eye. Simon found a way, in the most romantic fashion, to lift the veil on these places and to offer a glimpse of something else, something tantalisingly mysterious.

Finally, what prompted you to return to SM and his work in this new film?

After Simon passed away in 2012, I discussed with his wife, Lady Caroline, the possibility of creating a fitting tribute to his life and career. She and their daughter Skye were excited about the idea, so I set about putting it in motion. It wasn't long before Simon's great friend Gray Levett, owner of the [exclusively] Nikon outlet Grays of Westminster, came on board to co-produce, and shortly after we were given great support by the Broadway producers Craig Haffner and Sherry Wright.

I slowly began to gather all of the material I needed to create the film and the project began to take serious shape. It was tough at times; particularly when my wife and daughter and I went to stay at Simon's home at Hainton in Lincolnshire. You could feel his warmly imposing presence all about, but it brought back only the most pleasant of memories of our times together. I am hoping that those who saw him as a very serious man will be pleasantly surprised at his humour and also enthralled as they listen to voice recordings of him talking about his work and beliefs.

***Simon Marsden: A Life in Pictures*, directed by Jason Figgis, will be released by October Eleven Pictures this autumn.**

SOUNDS PECULIAR

BRIAN J ROBB PRESENTS THE FORTEAN TIMES PODCAST COLUMN

As a medium, podcasts have been enjoying something of a boom over the past few years. The democratisation of quality media production through high-specification computer equipment has allowed a plethora of previously marginalised voices their own access to what were once quaintly called 'the airwaves'.

In the past, broadcasting (reaching a wide audience from a single source) was heavily regulated and controlled, mainly through frequency scarcity: only those authorised or licensed to have access to the airwaves were allowed to broadcast. In UK terms that, initially, meant the BBC, with commercial stations coming along in the 1960s.

In terms of radio, there have been amateurs since the invention of the medium, reaching a crescendo with the offshore 'pirate' pop stations of the 1960s that ultimately led to the BBC launching Radio 1. For the longest time, Radio 4 (or NPR in the US) has been the default home of quality 'spoken word' content, whether that was drama, current affairs, or documentary radio.

Now, anyone with a microphone and an iPad, laptop, or computer and the right software can produce a decent podcast and launch their work onto a waiting world. Not all of them are good, while many are far better than you might expect, sometimes surpassing the productions of 'legitimate' broadcasters like the BBC or NPR. When it comes to fortean topics, there are a host of podcasts out there, ranging from the polished and compelling to the amateurish and downright weird. SOUNDS PECULIAR is your insider guide to the best of the current podcasts dealing with fortean topics: all you have to do is sit back and listen...

Podcast: Those Conspiracy Guys (https://thoseconspiracyguys.com)
Host: Gordon Rochford, Paul Kelly
Episode Count: Count: 90+
Format: Discussion with multiple participants
Established: September 2014
Frequency: Variable
Topics: Every popular conspiracy theory

How refreshing to hear a fortean podcast delivered in accents that are neither from the US nor in 'received pronunciation' English! Those Conspiracy Guys are a pair of Irish comedians with a fascination for the worlds of conspiracy. Gordon (known as 'Gordo') Rochford and Paul Kelly regularly host the show (occasionally with other guests) as if they are sitting around a table in a pub, perhaps after a few pints, enjoying the craic on a diverse range of subjects, all informed by popular conspiracy theories. They may, or may not, be wearing tinfoil hats while they do so...

"One of the main things behind Those Conspiracy Guys is to look at stuff and think critically, to be able to make your mind up about everything that's happened; not to be cynical and not to be suspicious or paranoid, but to be critical," explained Gordo on the second part of their massive investigation into the John F Kennedy assassination. The show even has a rock'n'roll theme tune with catchy lyrics that headline all the main conspiracy theories, while listeners are referred to as "co-conspirators".

Conspiracies are renowned for being complicated, entangled, and multi-faceted. There are often many threads to follow, multiple suspicious characters to uncover, and sometimes many years' worth of events to summarise. That maybe explains the tendency for instalments of Those Conspiracy Guys to balloon as the podcast matured. This can either be viewed as an admirable commitment to covering the chosen topics in the depth that conspiracy theorists enjoy, or it could be an unforgivable example of podcast bloat. Does anyone really need a five-and-a-half-hour investigation of the death of Princess Diana? Well, if it's something you're really interested in, then chances are you'll lap up every single minute of that April 2016 episode.

Over the past six seasons, Those Conspiracy Guys have covered all the usual suspects; from the deaths of the famous – Marilyn Monroe, Kurt Cobain, JFK, RFK, Michael Jackson, Martin Luther King Jr., John Lennon, and Elvis Presley – to well-worn conspiracy topics, such as the 9/11 attacks, the Apollo 11 Moon landing, the Manson family killing spree, the Jonestown massacre, and Hitler and the Nazi occult, they've touched all the bases. These topics are explored in varying detail, often at extreme length, but with the humour and chat that is the trademark of this show.

There are a host of occult/paranormal episodes dealing with subjects such as mermaids, werewolves, ghosts, UFOs (a podcast on the Roswell Incident has mysteriously gone missing, which may be a conspiracy in itself), Slenderman, Amityville, Sasquatch, Atlantis, and Area 51. Fortean personalities such as Aleister Crowley, David Icke, Ed and Lorraine Warren, Zecharia Sitchin, and so-called time traveller John Titor each have episodes devoted to them. Many of these colourful characters allow the chucklesome duo to explore the humour involved in their dubious claims.

True crime is another strong strand explored here, often with a conspiracy or fortean bent, including US school shootings, the disappearance of Madeleine McCann, the Boston bombings, the Aurora cinema shooting, and even Jimmy Savile and the UK pædophile scandal. Abstract subjects also come under the microscope, such as a fascinating episode on simulation theory (are we living inside a computer sim?), global warming, psychedelics and consciousness, Holocaust denial, peak oil, and supposed deep underground military bases (known as DUMBs), as well as institutions like the Vatican and the Mafia.

The shows are easy to listen to, well researched, and delivered in a relaxed, good-natured manner. The only problem might be the length devoted to some of the bigger subjects, but if you've got a daily commute, one episode of Those Conspiracy Guys could see you to work and home again for a full week! I'd say that's good value.

Strengths: Laid-back chat and a welcoming atmosphere

Weaknesses: Sometimes, the comedy asides can take the entire podcast off-track

Recommended episodes: The very first podcast, on the Philadelphia Experiment, makes a good starting point; The Assassination of JFK Parts One and Two tackle the granddaddy of all conspiracy theories in an almost four-hour epic; In November 2017, the trio tackled Operation Paperclip, the US military scientific conspiracy that brought Nazi scientists into the American space programme.

Verdict: From small acorns a monster has grown. Starting with 90 minute shows, Those Conspiracy Guys now regularly produce podcasts of five hours or more in duration, promising entertainment and in-depth coverage of just about every conspiracy you can think of...

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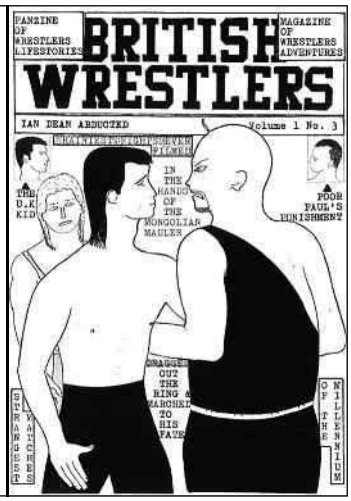

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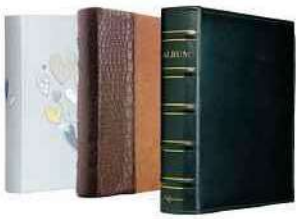

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Play fair re Playfair!

As the writer of the 1992 BBC TV drama *Ghostwatch*, I have to say Alan Murdie is wrong in stating that "Guy [Playfair] was not an adviser to the show." [**FT368:25**]. I was the one who suggested to the producer that Playfair come in to talk to the director and cast, as his experience of poltergeist cases was second to none – and I was there when he did so. I saw him and Michael Parkinson shake hands and remember him being extremely informative. For his time on that day, Guy was given a fee by the BBC and credited on screen as "Psychic Consultant" – for all to see in the end credits. I don't see how these facts can be interpreted as him "not being an adviser", however disgruntled Playfair and his SPR colleagues may have been about the programme after it aired.

It is interesting that his general evangelical loathing of television as a medium did not prevent him from giving permission to, and presumably getting a fee for, the dramatisation of *The Enfield Haunting* (2015), which he also deplored. Supping with a very, very long spoon, no doubt.

Stephen Volk
Bradford-on-Avon, Wiltshire

Not so Raven

"Shakespeare mentions ravens more the [sic] 50 times, exceeding any other animal species." [Munin in Memoriam, **FT367:10**]. Not so. Shakespeare mentions ravens 21 times. Of the non-human animals those mentioned more often than the raven include horses, dogs, cats, sheep, lambs, lions, foxes, wolves, eagles, doves and geese.

Martin Stubbs
London

Robin portent

I was interested to read Roger Wyld's letter about robins and funerals [**FT366:77**]. My father passed on to me a strange superstition concerning a robin landing on your head. Now any bird landing on your head is unusual enough, but seeing a robin landing on someone's head a few days before their death strikes me as certainly sinister. On two occasions many years ago my father saw a robin land on a close relative's head, and both of them died a few days later – which engendered a deep fear of seeing robins coming close to any family member. I've always considered this to be a very obscure phenomenon unique to my family, so would be interested to hear of any similar accounts from readers.

John Hope
Bournemouth, Dorset

SIMULACRA CORNER

Drinking dragon

Emer Wiseman photographed this rock on the Isle of Man's smaller island, the Calf of Man. It is known locally as the Drinking Dragon.

We are always glad to receive pictures of spontaneous forms and figures, or any curious images. Send them (with your postal address) to Fortean Times, PO Box 2409, London NW5 4NP or to sieveking@forteantimes.com.

The almasty and lard

Re Daniel Clay's suggestion that some almasty sightings may have been men in ghillie suits [**FT367:73**]: one man has already been killed whilst faking a sasquatch sighting dressed in one. Back in 2012 Randy Lee Tenley was hit by two cars on Highway 93, Flathead County, Montana. Tenley was apparently pretending to be bigfoot at the time.

• The shaven-headed gentleman in a leather kilt who won the lard eating competition at Weird Weekend North 2018 [**FT367:22**] was Ben Fidler, who ate a whole block of lardy goodness. The runner up was Ben Emlyn-Jones who scoffed half a block. We might try dripping next year.

Richard Freeman
Zoological Director, Centre for Fortean Zoology, Exeter

Cyrano

I greatly enjoyed the articles on witchcraft [**FT367:32-44**]. Malcolm Gaskill may not be aware that a few years ago BBC Radio 4 broadcast a play that dramatised the fraught making of *Witchfinder General*.

To Matt Salusbury's list of witchcraft sceptics should be added the name of Cyrano de Bergerac, who published *For Witches* and *Against Witches* in the 1640s. Cyrano was a total sceptic on the subject; he published anonymously, which was a wise precaution in the Catholic France of his day.

Witchcraft trials continued in England into the 18th century. One was presided over by Lord Mansfield and involved evidence that the accused had been seen walking in the air, upside-down. Mansfield delivered a thoroughly fortean judgement: "I do not doubt that this woman has walked in the air with her feet upward, since you all have seen it, but she has the honour to be born in England as well as you and I, and consequently cannot be judged but by the laws of the country, nor punished but in proportion as she has violated them. Now, I know not one law that forbids walking in the air with her feet upward. We all have a right to do it with impunity; I see no reason, therefore, for this prosecution, and this poor woman may return when she pleases."

Martin Jenkins
London

LETTERS

Slaughterbots

I found the article on 'slaughterbots' [**FT367:26**] interesting. However, the video is not the first to demonstrate it. In the YV series *Criminal Minds* (2017 season) there was an episode where a serial killer was using killer drones.

• If I read it correctly, the article on the Sonora Desert Incident [**FT367:31**] states that the aircraft in *Close Encounters of the Third Kind* sighted a UFO over the Sonora Desert. In fact, the incident happened near Indiana and the plane was communicating with air traffic control in Indianapolis. That's a long way from the desert.

Gregory Sumrall
Mississippi

Racoon saboteurs

Regarding the 'racoon saboteur', that caused a power cut in Berlin [**FT364:9**]: apparently this is a pretty common occurrence. One of the critters died after wandering into an electricity substation in Knoxville, Tennessee, on 12 April and knocking out power to 42,900 customers in West Knoxville. As the report in the *Knoxville News-Sentinel* (13 April 2018) said: "If the animal planned the attack to maximise the devastation, it did so with great care: the substation targeted was an 'infeed' substation where power flows from the Tennessee Valley Authority to several other Knoxville Utilities Board substations." Perhaps they're being trained by the Russians?

Brett Taylor
By email

Rapp RIP

Sad news on the musical front, further to my piece on Classics and the counterculture [**FT356:55**]: Tom Rapp, a wonderful songwriter who was Dylan 2.0 to some of us, died in February. Alcibiades, Barry Baldwin's talking dog [**FT368:13**] might have interested him: on his 1973 album *Sunforest* he credits – between Karl Himmel (drums, bell, wind chimes, Arabian drum, percussion) and Bobby Thompson (dobro, guitar, banjo) – a dog called Josh. How exactly Josh contributed to *Sunforest* we may never know.

Richard George
St Albans, Hertfordshire

More slandering lizards

Bearded lizards (bearded dragons) are not poisonous [see **FT364:73**], but are famous for startling kittens on YouTube videos. *Mexican* beaded lizards are the poisonous ones.

John Everett
By email

F Gwynplaine Macintyre

I thought you might be interested in some of my research into the life and immolation of my old acquaintance Fergus Gwynplaine Macintyre. It appears a relative who bore a resemblance to Fergus did eventually claim the remains from the Brooklyn mortuary. One should bear in mind that Fergus did claim to have a brother who bore a striking similarity to him. I can't find any information concerning where the remains were disposed of. Because of the dubious nature of all supposed 'facts' about Fergus, the question

JORODO

arises as to which brother was reduced to ashes and which collected those ashes.

With Angus Mackay I have kept a close eye on 'Macintyre' manifestations since his 'death' in 2010. I have noticed on some of the websites he frequented missives claiming to be from him coming from Ayer's Rock in Australia. He appeared in the 2013 film *Baby Peggy: the elephant in the room*, a documentary about the silent film star Peggy-Jean Montgomery. This would have been close to Fergus's heart as Baby Peggy, despite earning millions from her films, was cruelly exploited and all her money stolen. I have put the sequence where Fergus meets up with Baby Peggy on YouTube. It is without question the man I knew from the streets of Brooklyn and Manhattan. Also, the *New York Times* still has a film about Fergus on YouTube under the title "NY Region: Fiery end for an eccentric recluse".

Another area of research was Fergus's claim to have written dialogue for *The Prisoner* and appeared in an episode as an extra. I watched the series again and sure enough found a young Fergus marching with a band around Portmeirion in the full regalia of *Prisoner* blazer and hat while beating a drum (above). So it does seem that part of his narrative was true.

Prof. Ian Scott Wood
Brooklyn, New York

Editor's note: Besides writing fantasy, horror, SF, mysteries and erotica, the author known as "Macintyre" wrote to Fortean Times on a number of topics (see Necrolog, **FT268:26-27***). According to his own account, he was born in Perthshire in 1948, rejected by his parents and shipped out to Australia in the 1950s as part of the infamous UK child migrant scheme. In the 1970s, he adopted "Fergus Gwynplaine Macintyre" as his legal name. The records revealing his birth name are officially sealed. His friends called him "Froggy Macintyre". For the taxman he was "Timothy C Allen", his passport was in the name of "Paul Grant Jeffery" and he subscribed to magazines as "Oleg V Bredikhine".*

Since the mid-Eighties, he lived a hermit-like existence in a working class area of Brooklyn, New York. On 25 June 2010 he set two fires inside his cluttered one-bedroom apartment. A body was found burned beyond recognition amid tons of charred newspapers, books, manuscripts and rubbish. Many of his neighbours learned he was a writer only when charred, double-spaced pages of a manuscript fluttered down from his burned-out windows.

A Place for Milton

I recently spoke with a friend who told me a fascinating slice of Greater Manchester folklore. She is from the Oldham area and it was always the case that her family would set an extra place at the dinner table for 'Milton', which was the name given to that place in lieu of any person who might turn up at the front door and be in need of a meal. Based on her age, this would still have been practised in the late 1970s at least.

There is a tenuous link here to the Northern English folkloric creature known as the Lubber Fiend/Lubberkin/Lob. This goblin-type, tailed being is mentioned by John Milton in his poem *L'Allegro*, but only as earning his meal (and a place by the hearth) through threshing the fields in the time "that ten day-labourers could not end". He is therefore not treated as a weary traveller in need of goodwill and charity but has to work for his food. Could perhaps this idea of a stranger arriving for a meal have transferred into later centuries with the name of the poet Milton now attached?

I would be interested to hear

Mysterious handprint

This handprint appeared on a sofa in a home in Brackenfell, Cape Town, South Africa. The lady (known to me) who took the picture has owned the sofa for some time, but had recently moved it into her new home. The detail seen (the ring and fingernails) makes me think of a Shroud of Turin effect, almost like a photographic image taken from above, as opposed to an impression of the flat underside of the hand.

The only explanation I can think of is that she was sitting on her hand, palm side up while on the couch, but this raises some questions: could she forget that she had been sitting in that manner for long enough for it to make an image? Could it actually imprint an image with that level of detail? Did the image match her hand size (she is a lady of advanced years) and does the ring match?

I will endeavour to get answers to these questions and send you an update.

Ryan Snyman
Cape Town, South Africa

Editor's note: For a very similar image made on a mattress in a hospice in Thornton, Lancashire, in 1981, see our photo report ("The Shroud of Liverpool", **FT51:7-8**). The image – which portrayed much of the body of a dying West Indian man – was made through pyjamas and sheet, and baffled forensic scientists.

of any other examples of 'Milton' being laid a place in other parts of Britain – or indeed any other names for possible dinner guests!

Duncan Kaiser
Morges, Switzerland

Pippa the Robot

With regard to the inexorable rise of the robots [**FT368:30-35**], I would like to offer the following anecdote. I recently found out that my Borough Council had purchased a "Pippa the Robot" to help with geriatric care. Pippa the Robot is a shiny, articulated smiling robot with a chest screen. My immediate thought was that if I were to reach a dignified old age and someone were to park this thing in my room and have it beep at me, I would want to thwack it with my walking stick. A rather amusing and tongue-in-cheek flurry of emails with my MP ensued, in which I pointed out the ludicrous expense, the stereotypical and patronising attitude to the elderly, and the unnerving fact that if this was a publicity stunt to attract young people into working in social care, then it would only work on unsuitable candidates. And at the end of it all, what have you really gained? Having Pippa wave its fragile arms at you while it smiles its smile and beeps its beeps is little different from being parked in front of the telly, which represents a fraction of the cost and a boost in variety. And the thought that some poor grandparent could have a seizure and die, having this ghoulish automaton as the last thing they see, is truly horrifying. And so, in this case at least, I see "the rise of the robots" as a fobbing off of human contact. They are being required to do a kind of ersatz human contact chore that real human beings don't want to be bothered with.

James Wright
Westcliff-on-Sea, Essex

Ears and olive oil

Regarding the non-availability of olive oil for cooking in Britain [Mythchaser, **FT367:25**]: recently, before I could have a hearing test for hearing aids, I had to have my ears "washed or flushed" ("We don't say syringed anymore as it has unfortunate connotations for some people") for the first time since I was a child. As I had a lot of wax very near my eardrum the nurse said I would have to get some olive oil from the chemist / pharmacy. I said I had plenty of olive oil at home only to be told: "Ordinary olive oil, even the extra virgin kind, contains bacteria that, while harmless when taken into the gut, can cause some nasty infections if they entered the ear canal. For softening ear wax it has to be the sterilised kind." When I was a child in the 1950s, it seemed almost routine for doctors to "syringe" your ears after inspection. However, when suggesting softening the earwax, they would always insist "only use the olive oil you can get from the chemists". No doubt when the NHS started many people who had not had regular health checks, or regularly used olive oil in cooking, misheard or through a type of 'Chinese whispers' when talking to others this became "You can only get olive oil from..." So, I would suggest the 'belief' or 'common knowledge' started around the late 1940s / early 1950s. Having said that, the only place I remember seeing *cooking* olive oil when I was a child was in a local (Italian owned) delicatessen, but then I seldom looked at the shelves in 'ordinary' grocers.

• Re the letter from Richard Muirhead about a 'pink frog' found in rock [**FT367:73**]: Flora Thompson, best known for *From Lark Rise To Candleford*, mentions in both *A Country Diary* and *The Peveral Papers* toads being found inside flints. I have a – possibly false – memory of a description by her of being shown one by some workmen. If this memory is correct it would have been in a biography of her that I read some years ago.

Dean Smith
Chesham, Buckinghamshire

Scribblers

I must take Jan Bondeson to task for his snide comment in his 'Severed Heads' article that the "scribblers employed by the *Economist* should concentrate on economy and leave the field of art well alone" [**FT368:43**]. I have read every single issue of the *Economist* for the past 25 years, and there are precious few publications that are better at combining top-quality journalism with expert comment on most topics under the sun, *besides* economics. They also have a wicked sense of humour that frequently makes me laugh out loud. I am inclined to think that their comment on Antoine Wiertz was an example of this; I have always found their comments on the arts informed and intelligent, and they surely have as much right to their opinions as any Cardiff rheumatologist.

Nils Erik Grande
Oslo, Norway

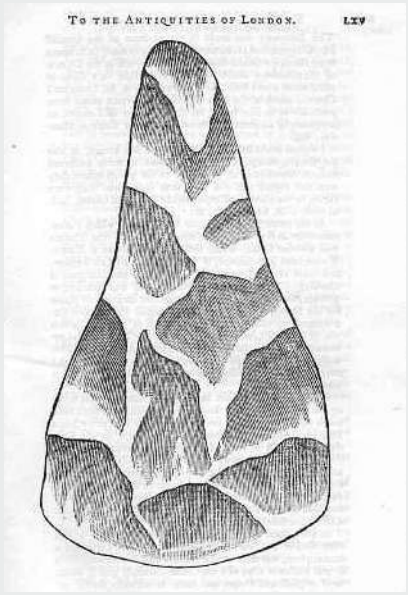
LETTERS

Thunderstones

In his letter about 'thunderstones' [**FT368:76**] Dave Trevor says that Palæolithic handaxes were "not recognised in England as human artefacts until 1797, when antiquarian John Frere published a report on a cache discovered by clay diggers at Hoxne in Suffolk". This is not quite true, as a find made in London more than 100 years earlier shows.

On 11 December 1673 an elephant's tusk and other bones were dug out of the ground in a sand pit in Clerkenwell, close to the River Fleet. The find was reported by John Conyers, an apothecary with a shop in Fleet Street, a keen antiquary who ever since the Great Fire of London had kept a close watch on the rebuilding works and bought interesting finds from the labourers. The discovery caused a lot of discussion – what was an *elephant* doing in England? The tusk eventually came into the possession of Sir Hans Sloane, who concluded that the elephant was literally antediluvian – an animal caught up in the Biblical Flood whose bones had been swept by the force of the waters to their eventual resting place. But John Conyers himself disagreed, as he commented when further finds were made on the same site in 1679 – "Another Tooth & bone of ye elephant… slain in the Battle between ye Romans and ye Britains." For, according to a Roman historian, the invasion force that accompanied the Roman emperor Claudius to Britain in AD 43 had included war elephants.

The reason for the link between the Clerkenwell elephant and a battle between



Romans and Britons only becomes clear, however, from the writings of another amateur antiquary, John Bagford, a London bookseller. Bagford was interested in discoveries relating to Roman London, and wrote a long account of his (rather eccentric) views on the subject, which was printed by the Oxford publisher Thomas Hearne in 1715. Here he refers to the elephant, discovered by "the honest Industry of my old Friend Mr John Conyers", adding: "I know some will have it to have layn there ever since the Universal Deluge." But "for my own part I take it to have been brought over with many others by the Romans in the Reign of Claudius the Emperor [..] For not far from the Place where it was found, a British Weapon made of a Flint Lance like unto the Head of a Spear, fastned into a Shaft of a good Length, which was a Weapon very common amongst the Ancient Britains, was also dug up." Fortunately for us, he included a picture of the 'Flint Lance' – it is clearly a Palæolithic handaxe, and is perhaps the earliest illustration of such an implement.

The handaxe itself was eventually acquired by Sir Hans Sloane, and is now in the British Museum, where it is displayed in the 'Enlightenment' gallery alongside one of the handaxes from Hoxne collected by John Frere; both are now dated "around 400,000 years ago". The elephant itself may have been a now-extinct straight-tusked elephant *Palæoloxodon antiquus*, known to have been present in Britain during warm interglacial periods.

Conyers, Bagford, Sloane and others had no difficulty in identifying the handaxe as a human artefact. And even given contemporary views on the relatively 'short' history of the world and of humankind, beginning with the Biblical Creation, it was, of course, perfectly acceptable to assign such artefacts to the 'Ancient Britons' at the time of the Roman invasion – or even before. Presumably, as Dave Trevor said, it was John Frere's claim, based upon stratigraphy, that the Hoxne axes were of immense age (he wrote "a very remote period indeed, even beyond that of the present world") that "clashed with current church-based thinking on Creation".

John Clark
London

Harbinger of Doom?

Mothman has always been considered a harbinger of disaster. Mothman first appeared in Point Pleasant, West Virginia, in 1966, prior to the collapse of the Silver River Bridge in December 1967, which claimed 46 lives. Mothman appeared to a town in Russia in 1986, prior to the biggest nuclear waste disaster in history. That town was Chernobyl. And now, the rash of Mothman sightings over Chicago leads many to believe something is about to happen in the Windy City.

St Augustine wrote in *City of God* that monsters are meant to confuse. God is not the author of confusion (1 *Corinthians* 14:33). Satan is a deceiver. The next step in God's EndTimes plan is the removal of followers of Christ from Earth in the Rapture (1 *Thessalonians* 4:16-17). Those left behind will have to endure seven years of living Hell on Earth known as the Tribulation. Many will believe the Antichrist is the Messiah. Satan is using these demonic entities to take the world's eyes off God to prevent them from enjoying everlasting life in God's Kingdom.

Greg May
Orlando, Florida

Predatory gulls

I am a security guard working in a building belonging to a major financial institution in the City of London. Part of my duties involves patrolling the piazza between my building and the adjoining one. Recently I was on duty on the piazza when I heard a 'flop' sound behind me, consistent with a soft object hitting the ground; turning, I saw a disembodied pair of pigeon's wings – no sign of the rest of the bird, just the wings, joined by a piece of skin. Apparently, some aerial predator had devoured the bird, leaving, in the words of Pete Postlethwaite in *Jurassic Park 2*, "the bits it didn't like".

At first I thought the culprit had been a fox, which one does see from time to time in the City; I discounted this, as foxes do not fly, at least as far as I know. Another member of staff informed me that the day before, they had seen a seagull pecking at "something" on a ledge on the building opposite; I concluded that a gull had intercepted the pigeon in flight and had devoured it. It would appear that gulls, or at least one gull, has graduated from simple opportunistic scavenging, stealing chips from people on the seafront at Southend, to aerial attacks like hawks and kestrels. Has anyone else seen similar scenes?

Trevor A Millar
Tilbury, Essex

Terrible thirst

After reading the article "Mr Wilson and the aeronauts of 1897" [**FT362:38-43**], I am intrigued that in most of the alleged encounters on the ground, all the aeronauts seemed to want was water – by the bucketful! What did they want all that water for?

Brian Stevenson
Cornwall

IT HAPPENED TO ME...

First-hand accounts from *FT* readers and browsers of www.forteantimes.com

Aylesbury Vale Encounter

On 8 May 2018 at around 4pm I was returning home from Aylesbury on the A418 with my family. It was a fine afternoon as we drove through the hamlet of Rowsham when I noticed something in the sky over the Aylesbury Vale, to the east/southeast at an elevation of about 25 degrees. At distance of what seemed no more than 200 or 300 yards was a phenomenally large aircraft, which I initially took to be a commercial passenger plane, albeit one flying unnervingly low (Luton Airport is less than 10 miles away).

Unable to integrate what I was seeing with normal expectations of living under busy flightpaths, I started doubting this during the following moments. The thing was oblong, tubular I assumed, like a plane's body, and predominantly white with red patches at either end. At first I took it to be an Easyjet plane, except that its form was more reminiscent of a Virgin train passenger carriage than a commercial jet. In the clearest moments I could easily see a row of at least seven or eight very large and dark 'windows', at least twice as high as they were wide, almost the full height of the craft, with several feet between them. Finding that there weren't any wings as expected and neither was there a tail, I started to wonder just what the thing was. All I could tell is that it was symmetric, silent, made for occupancy (the windows), didn't seem to be moving fast – if at all – and it was very big indeed.

Seeing passenger planes seconds from landing was akin to the proximity and scale of this thing, minus any sense of sound or motion. The length might have been anywhere from 100ft (30m), at least as big as a Boeing 737, yet almost as characteristic of a vast tethered dirigible than a winged plane for having no speed or sound. As I tried to weigh all this up from my back seat vantage, I was able to keep it in view, though that was partially obscured by treetops passing in front of the thing so that I rarely had a clear view of it in its entirety. Did the flickering of the tree branches amplify an illusion, my unconscious supplying the rest from what it expected to be perceiving? We were only doing a sedate 30-40 mph. My wife and daughter in the front seats did not have the angle to see it, annoyingly.

As we ascended a short hill leaving Rowsham, and I was really starting to appreciate the fortean quality of the moment as we moved past this huge silent craft (still behind treetops) it became narrower as if turning, and perhaps accelerating, still silently, until I had a last momentary glimpse of a symmetric end profile with two ordinary aircraft wings, only much further away (real, or another combination of illusion and projection compensating my expectations?) Within about 15 seconds it was gone, and after a minute or two I saw an ordinary passenger aircraft flying fairly low, much smaller than the other thing, its tiny, barely visible windows and ordinary profile utterly unlike what I'd just seen.

If it was an ordinary aircraft why was it flying so low and quietly? How did it appear to progressively diminish in scale and disappear? Were the flickering treetops distorting whatever it was, causing the illusion of coloured markings, the windows, or even the thing's wingless form? It was convincing enough as a tangible and yet surreal aircraft for a relatively sustained period, though maybe my perception of it was influenced by the conditions (i.e. the trees, my relative position to the thing). Maybe I also experienced a mental propensity to 'override' or 'reverse' unique and unclassifiable perceptions into more acceptable forms based on a 'baseline' expectation of what is real (e.g. the windows, the train carriage resemblance, the final glimpse of both wings).

Could it be that not accepting or dismissing, tuning out of, the anomalous is a prime mammalian strategy for survival – at the expense of perceiving just how marvellous and strange the world can occasionally be in our midst? Incidentally or not, the latter part of this journey is punctuated by passage under a bridge over which Virgin trains travel, and indeed one did that day just as we approached the bridge, letting me compare the two sights. If the thing was illusionary, it should be repeatable; however, I've been the same way since and never seen the same.

Jerry Glover
Leighton Buzzard, Bedfordshire

Ghostly piano

I used to work in a London psychiatric hospital. One night shift last year, when all the patients were asleep, I was on my break sitting in the lounge area, when out of nowhere came the sound of piano playing, getting progressively louder. We obviously didn't have a piano on the unit; all the radios and televisions were off, and this music went on for about two minutes, eventually getting so loud that the other staff on duty came out of the nursing office to see where it was coming from. Eventually it faded away.

Some days later, I asked a colleague – who had worked at the hospital for over 40 years, and knew the history of the place – about this. He told me that back in the 1970s the building where I used to work once had a grand piano and that a patient there was an accomplished pianist who used to play for staff and patients alike. This patient had long since passed away. Over the years, since the old building was pulled down and the new unit opened, other staff had reported hearing the same piano playing.

Chris Cromer
Kingston, Surrey

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FORTEAN TIMES is a monthly magazine of news, reviews and research on strange phenomena and experiences, curiosities, prodigies and portents. It was founded by Bob Rickard in 1973 to continue the work of Charles Fort (1874–1932).

Born of Dutch stock in Albany, New York, Fort spent many years researching scientific literature in the New York Public Library and the British Museum Library. He marshalled his evidence and set forth his philosophy in *The Book of the Damned* (1919), *New Lands* (1923), *Lo!* (1931), and *Wild Talents* (1932).

He was sceptical of dogmatic scientific explanations, observing how scientists argued according to their own beliefs rather than the rules of evidence and that inconvenient data were ignored, suppressed, discredited or explained away. He criticised modern science for its reductionism, its attempts to define, divide and separate. Fort's dictum "One measures a circle beginning anywhere" expresses instead his philosophy of Continuity in which everything is in an intermediate and transient state between extremes.

He had ideas of the Universe-as-organism and the transient nature of all apparent phenomena, coined the term 'teleportation', and was perhaps the first to speculate that mysterious lights seen in the sky might be craft from outer space. However, he cut at the very roots of credulity: "I conceive of nothing, in religion, science or philosophy, that is more than the proper thing to wear, for a while."

Fort was by no means the first person to collect anomalies and oddities – such collections have abounded from Greece to China since ancient times. **Fortean Times** keeps alive this ancient task of dispassionate weird-watching, exploring the wild frontiers between the known and the unknown.

Besides being a journal of record, **FT** is also a forum for the discussion of observations and ideas, however absurd or unpopular, and maintains a position of benevolent scepticism towards both the orthodox and unorthodox. **FT** toes no party line.

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PHENOMENOMIX BERBIGUIER · Part 2

HUNT EMERSON & BOB RICKARD

BERBIGUIER WAS BORN IN CARPENTRAS, SOUTHERN FRANCE, IN 1764, AND LIVED THROUGH THE REVOLUTION! AGED 32, HE MOVED TO AVIGNON, WHERE A SERIES OF UNFORTUNATE ENCOUNTERS TRIGGERED HIS MANIA!

HE CONSULTED A 'CLAIRVOYANT' CALLED MANSOTTE

SIEVE AND TWO SCISSORS

?

...BUT HE WAS DISTURBED BY HER BIZARRE RITUALS...

HE WENT TO SEE Dr. NICHOLAS THE MESMERIST...

...BUT HE WAS "AN EMISSARY OF MOLOCH!"

SO HE WENT TO PARIS TO SEE THE FAMOUS MAGICIAN MOREAU...

PICK A CARD

ANY CARD...

...BUT HE WAS MERELY A STREET PERFORMER!

HE WAS EVEN EXPLOITED BY A PRIEST, WHO-FED UP WITH BERBIGUIER'S NON-STOP TALKING-WROTE LETTERS PRETENDING TO BE BEELZEBUB!

Dear Lord of Hell, I hope you are well! Yours, grovelling...

BERBIGUIER ANSWERED THEM ALL, AND FOR A WHILE ENGAGED IN A CIVILISED CORRESPONDENCE WITH THE UPPER ECHELONS OF HELL!

BERBIGUIER'S DIGS WERE STUFFED WITH IMPS "IN EVERY NOOK AND CRANNY"! THEIR GENERAL-RHOTOMAGO-ONE OF BEELZEBUB'S STAFF, "PROPOSED TO ME THAT I SHOULD ENTER THEIR ACCURSED FELLOWSHIP!" I, OF COURSE, REPULSED HIM INDIGNANTLY!"

HIS MORNING MAIL WAS STUFFED WITH LETTERS FROM THE DIGNITARIES OF HADES!

I SAY! WHAT A CHARMING LETTER! I MUST REPLY...

Dear M. Berbiguier, We wish you a.s.f. You are invited to join us in the legions of Hell. Warmest regards, Beelzebub and his pals.

THE IMPS WOULD TORMENT HIM IN BED, SOMETIMES PLAYFULLY...

ONLY JOKING MATE

HE WOULD CAPTURE THEM AND IMPRISON THEM IN BOTTLES...

HE EXPERIMENTED WITH FUMIGATION TO SUBDUE THE IMPS – BURNING SULPHUR, BOILING ODD MIXTURES, AND CRUSHING AND BURNING THE HERB THYME...

HE WOULD TALK INTERMINABLY TO ANYONE ABOUT HIS MISSION TO RID THE WORLD OF IMPS!

...AND ANYWHERE HE WENT THE IMPS WOULD PURSUE HIM...

ONCE HE WAS UNABLE TO CROSS THE SEINE BECAUSE AN IMP MOB HAD BARRICADED THE PONT-NEUF!

BUT THE LAST STRAW FOR BERBIGUIER WAS WHEN THE IMPS CHASED HIM INTO THE CONFESSIONAL BOOTH!

FATHER, I HAVE SINNED!

SO HAVE WE!!

NEXT: DEMONOLOGIST-HEAL THYSELF!

COMING NEXT MONTH

THE SECRET WAR

WINSTON CHURCHILL'S WORLD OF STRANGE PHENOMENA

SCREEN MEMORIES

JOHN KEEL'S ADVENTURES IN HOLLYWOOD

+

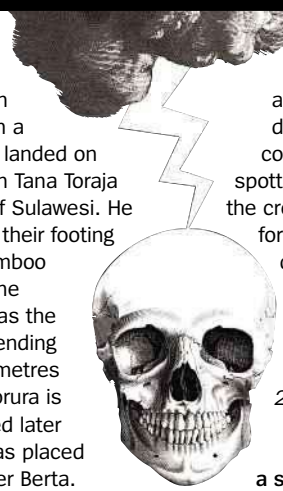
DREAMS AND GHOSTS, CRINOLINE INFERNO, FORT DOWN UNDER, AND MUCH MORE...

FORTEAN TIMES 371

ON SALE 13 SEP 2018

STRANGE DEATHS

UNUSUAL WAYS OF SHUFFLING OFF THIS MORTAL COIL



Samen Kondorura, 40, was killed on 17 June when his mother's coffin fell from a *lakkian* (funeral tower) and landed on his head during a service in Tana Toraja on the Indonesian island of Sulawesi. He died when pallbearers lost their footing carrying the coffin up a bamboo ladder. Video from the scene shows the ladder slip just as the casket enters the tower, sending the men tumbling several metres to the ground where Kondorura is struck by the coffin. He died later in hospital and his body was placed alongside that of his mother Berta. When ethnic Torajans die, local residents hold funerals that can last for days and involve music, dance and the sacrifice of water buffalo. The dead are interred in caves and their mummified remains brought out annually to be washed, dressed in fresh clothes and walked around the village. For comparable rites, see "Awakening the dead in Madagascar" by Michael Griffin [**FT55:47-49, 56:38-40**]. *[AFP] dailymail.co.uk, 17 June; Times, 18 June 2018.*

An Indonesian farmer was found inside the belly of a 7m (23ft) python after the animal was caught near where he vanished on 27 March 2017 while harvesting his crops. The body of Akbar, 25, was discovered inside the giant snake, which had been spotted slithering awkwardly in Salubiro village, on the island of Sulawesi. "We were immediately suspicious that the snake had swallowed Akbar because around the site we found palm fruit, his harvesting tool and a boot," said Junaidi, a village official.

Another victim of a 7m python in Indonesia was Wa Tiba, 54, snatched from her vegetable garden on 14 June 2018. Villagers found her body the following day when they cut open the bloated serpent in the village of Persiapan Lawela on the island of Muna, off Sulawesi. It was lying about 45m (150ft) from Tiba's sandals and machete. She had been swallowed headfirst and her clothed body was found intact. While reticulated pythons have been known to attack small animals, attempts to eat people are rare. In 2013, a security guard on the island of Bali was killed by a python at a luxury beachfront hotel [see FT313:25]. *[AFP] 29 Mar 2017, 17 June 2018; Guardian, 17 June 2018.*

A 35-year-old Indian woman from Uttar Pradesh was bitten by a snake in her sleep on 24 May. She didn't realise she had been bitten when she woke and breastfed her three-year-old daughter. Both died before they could reach hospital. The family spotted the snake in another room but the creature escaped. India accounts for 46,000 of the 100,000 snakebite deaths around the world each year, according to a 2011 study by the American Society of Tropical Medicine and Hygiene. *[AFP] medicalxpress.com, 26 May 2018.*

Judith Permar, 56, was using a stool to retrieve items from a charity clothing collection box near Mount Carmel, Pennsylvania, at 2am on 5 February 2017 when the stool collapsed, trapping her arm in the shutter. She was found dead at 8.30 the next morning, dangling from the box. An autopsy revealed her left arm and wrist were broken, and she died from blunt force trauma and hypothermia. Her Hummer was parked nearby with the engine still running. *Philadelphia Inquirer, D.Mail, 7 Feb 2017.*

Ekaterina Fedyaeva, 27, died in agony after blundering medics put her on a drip filled with embalming fluid, instead of saline, after routine surgery. She suffered vomiting and violent convulsions after her body was slowly flooded with formalin – a solution containing formaldehyde. Fedyaeva, from Ulyanovsk, southern Russia, fell into a coma for two days. She was flown to Moscow and woke up, but then died of organ failure. *D.Mirror, 9 April 2018*.

An unnamed German died trying to melt slices of cheese on his penis while sitting next to a heater. Police found him wearing women's tights, a diving suit and raincoat, with a plastic bag over his head. *Sun, 9 Feb 2018.*

Chhoeun Samorn, 32, died and his neighbour Vath Sameth, 47, was injured on 15 May after a 60mm mortar shell exploded in Cambodia's Banteay Meanchey province. The two men were using the old shell as a hammer to separate the body of a tractor from its engine. "The dead man had kept the old mortar at his home for a long time, but he was not aware that it could explode because it was so rusted," said the local police chief. Between 1979 and 2017, Cambodia's unexploded ordnance caused 64,688 casualties. *Khmer Times (Cambodia), 17 May 2018.*

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